



# Submission to the Independent Review into the Tasmanian Education System

**11 October 2024**

This submission is made by Save the Children and 54 reasons. **Save the Children** is a leading global non-government organisation that has been active in Australia for over 100 years. **54 reasons** is our Australian delivery arm, working alongside children, young people, their families and communities in line with the 54 articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We are Australia's leading child rights organisation. In Tasmania, we provide state-wide early childhood development, family support and youth services (including youth justice bail and post-detention supports), along with school-based programs and supports.

## General recommendations

We suggest that the greatest gains in the performance of Tasmania's education system can be achieved by focusing on four overarching priorities:

1. Recognise that access to education is a right
2. Integrate education system reform with broader child, youth and family-focused reform
3. Prioritise student voice and children's and young people's participation in education
4. Focus directly on student engagement as a critical pillar and outcome of education

The rest of our submission explains these recommendations.

### 1. Access to education is a right

Children have a fundamental right to access high quality education, on an equitable basis, through settings and delivery modes that suit and include them.<sup>1</sup> The best way to improve and maximise student outcomes is by establishing school systems and associated policy arrangements that truly recognise this as a right that all children are entitled to enjoy. This should be the guiding principle for all other reform.

More broadly, adopting a rights-based approach to designing Tasmania's education system would enable consistency with broader reforms already underway that emphasise child rights as a foundational element – see below.

### 2. Education reform should be integrated with broader child, youth and family-focused reform

There has recently been a significant volume of policy and system reform and government activity focused on children and young people in Tasmania. This includes, among others:

- The *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy – 'It Takes a Tasmanian Village'* (2021)
- The establishment of the Department for Education, Children and Young People (DECYP) as a single department with overall responsibility for the outcomes of Tasmanian children and young people in 2022
- The report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings (2023)

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 28.



- The *Youth Justice Blueprint 2024-2034*
- The draft *Change for Children Strategy* and Action Plan, released for public consultation in 2024

These important initiatives emphasise responding to children and young people holistically and bridging across silos in policy, services and systems. They explicitly recognise the value of upholding children's rights. In some respects, Tasmania is now nation-leading in these matters.

Schools and other education settings are central spaces in children's and young people's lives. Apart from family and home environments, they are the most important sites for children's and young people's overall development. Student outcomes can be significantly improved when schools are better integrated with other services for children and families. In turn this enables better overall outcomes for children, young people and families, including through the critical protective role that education plays for those at risk of contact with child protection, youth justice or other acute services.

Yet, too often, the education system continues to operate largely siloed from these broader considerations. The review into Tasmania's education system is an important opportunity to continue the momentum towards an integrated approach to upholding the rights of children and young people and delivering improved outcomes for them.

Key elements of a more integrated education system that is connected to the broader reform initiatives underway in Tasmania would include:

- *Children and young people* are at the centre of integrated systems that are organised around them and their best interests, and where they have a say, including their schools
- *Caregivers and families* are supported to help their children to engage positively with education, with responsibility sitting with the system rather than with individual parents or caregivers, particularly where intergenerational experiences of education create barriers
- *Schools and other education settings* are supported and resourced to work in a therapeutic way, and with trauma behaviours, with children and young people, and to engage meaningfully with families – including where families are experiencing significant challenges
- *Systems* are designed to directly address the significant, systemic barriers to accessing and remaining engaged in education and achieving good educational outcomes faced by some children and young people, including better use of data through schools to identify children and young people who would benefit from additional out-of-school support as soon as possible.

We are keenly aware that schools are already required to take on a large – and growing – volume of responsibilities relating to their students. We acknowledge these trends, and the pressures they are putting on schools and their workforces. At the same time, it is essential that efforts to adopt a more holistic approach are continued. This requires genuine system reform, rather than ad hoc efforts.

### **3. Student voice and children's and young people's participation should be prioritised**

Students have a right to be heard and taken seriously on all matters that affect them and their education, from the classroom, to whole-school decision-making, and extending to state government policy-making. This is grounded in the right that all children and young people have to participate in, and shape, their own lives, as recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>2</sup>

Students have unique expertise about education and lived experience about how the school system operates and how it could be improved. They should be involved at all stages of the education policy

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<sup>2</sup> Article 12 of the Convention. The Convention applies to all children and young people aged up to 18.



process. Students are the most important stakeholders in education. They should be heard and taken seriously.

Student voice, agency and participation drives improved wellbeing, engagement and learning.<sup>3</sup> When students have a meaningful, embedded voice about their education, individually and system-wide, there are significant compounding benefits for students' own outcomes and for overall school system performance. The benefits include enhanced accountability, improved policy-making, more effective implementation, greater community and school-level support for policies and initiatives, and enhanced wellbeing, engagement and other outcomes for students through their participation.

Specific actions that could be taken to embed students' voices and lived experiences of the school system in education system policies and institutions include:

- The Tasmanian Government should engage meaningfully with students when engaging with this review, to ensure student perspectives inform its decisions about the education system.
- The Tasmanian Government should establish ongoing advisory and consultation mechanisms to enable meaningful student involvement in implementation, monitoring, evaluation and review of education system performance. This should be established with an appropriate level of resourcing and independence from government. The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is a possible model, as an independent student-led organisation currently performing this role in Victoria.<sup>4</sup>
- The Tasmanian Government should support the development of resources providing guidance for education sector organisations – including government departments – about how to embed students' voices and lived experiences in their work, including how to consult and engage meaningfully with students. This should be accompanied by the rollout of a training program. Both the resources and training should be co-designed and co-delivered with students themselves, supported by organisations that represent students as required.
- The Tasmanian Government should measure and report on student voice, agency and participation. Outcomes and indicators of the system's performance in supporting student voice, agency and participation should be co-designed with students themselves and be relevant to all students, with specific focus on students facing particular barriers to accessing education.
- Ensuring appropriate representation of diverse student voices at all stages should be a priority, recognising that certain voices are particularly likely to be excluded and often these are the students least likely to have positive experiences of education or equitable access to education.

#### 4. Reform efforts should focus directly on student engagement

Wellbeing, engagement and learning are the three pillars of a quality education,<sup>5</sup> for individual students and across school systems as a whole. Wellbeing, engagement and learning are inseparably interrelated. Each is a crucial outcome of schooling in its own right, and a necessary enabler for the others. For example, positive wellbeing and engagement with learning are important ends in themselves, as well as

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<sup>3</sup> D Gonski et al, 2018, *Through growth to achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, pp 25-6; Department of Education and Training, Victorian Government, 2019, *Amplify: Empowering students through voice, agency and leadership*, pp 8-9 and elsewhere; Department of Education, NSW Government, 2022, *Why student voice matters*, <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/student-voices/student-voice-and-leadership/why-student-voice-matters#Research0>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://vicsrc.org.au/>.

<sup>5</sup> Centre for Adolescent Health, 2018, *Student wellbeing, engagement and learning across the middle years*, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, p 14.



being essential preconditions for successful academic learning. Student wellbeing and engagement are key drivers of student outcomes across academic achievement, skill acquisition and more broadly.<sup>6</sup>

Recent years have seen a welcome focus across Australian jurisdictions, and nationally, on student *wellbeing*. This has not yet been accompanied by a corresponding focus on student *engagement*.

Engagement with learning includes behavioural, emotional (or affective) and cognitive dimensions.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, this extends beyond merely attending and completing school. Students who are engaged with learning feel connected to education and school, participate in academic and other activities at school, have a sense of belonging and inclusion at their school, believe they are learning and developing meaningful skills, take ownership of their learning, and feel that what they are doing at school is purposeful. Disengagement comprises a continuum including passive attendance, actively disruptive behaviour, or being absent or ultimately dropping out of school altogether.<sup>8</sup>

School education policy tends to give insufficient emphasis to directly addressing school engagement, which in practice is often regarded – explicitly or tacitly – as depending on levers that are not traditionally held or prioritised by education systems. There are significant opportunities to improve system-wide outcomes in Tasmania’s education system by focusing directly on engagement.

Specific actions that could be taken to improve engagement with learning in Tasmania include:

- The Tasmanian Government should ensure that all schools, and all students, can access specialist, evidence-informed in-school programs that promote student wellbeing and engagement. These programs should focus on students who are at particular risk of disengaging, or who are already disengaged but still connected to school, and should build on the positive investments and directions that the Government has already set.
- The Tasmanian Government should support schools to engage with families beyond the school gate. Families and schools should be true partners in addressing the underlying drivers of disengagement, working with other specialist services, including when families are facing significant challenges.
- The Tasmanian Government should systematically measure both wellbeing and engagement. This should include student-centred indicators that are co-developed with students themselves to ensure that measurement is meaningful and based in students’ experiences and perspectives.

Our views on the importance of focusing directly on both student wellbeing and student engagement are informed by our experience working directly with schools and students in Tasmania and nationally. Our evidence-informed school-based programs directly target these outcomes and have long-term demonstrated impact in improving overall student outcomes for their participants.

**Hands on Learning** builds at-risk students’ connection to school by engaging them in practical, hands-on activities that are meaningful to them and their schools, increasing their sense of belonging with an

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<sup>6</sup> J Durlak et al, 2011, ‘Enhancing students’ social and emotional development promotes success in school: Results of a meta-analysis’, *Child Development* 82: 474-501; Deloitte Access Economics, 2012, *The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving*; S Lamb et al, 2015, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Mitchell Institute; Centre for Adolescent Health, above n 5; Social Ventures Australia, 2019, *Children and young people disengaged from education*; K Dix et al, 2020, *Student health and wellbeing: A systematic review of intervention research examining effective student wellbeing in schools and their academic outcomes*, Australian Council for Educational Research.

<sup>7</sup> J Fredricks, P Blumenfeld and A Paris, 2004, ‘School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence’, *Review of Educational Research* 74(1): 59-109.

<sup>8</sup> K Hancock and S Zubrick, 2015, *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school*, Telethon Kids Institute, prepared for the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, pp 14-17.



explicit focus on teaching, building and measuring social and emotional skills development. The program has been recognised by Finnish non-profit HundrED as a globally innovative education program.<sup>9</sup> A 2022 review by dandolopartners highlighted that 95 per cent of participants finish school or get an apprenticeship or a job. The independent analysis found the program ‘meets a clear need’, ‘is grounded in evidence and demonstrates a commitment to measuring impact’ and has a ‘very low threshold for investment in the program to break even and to deliver a positive return on investment. If only 1.1% of their annual cohort finish school when they wouldn’t have otherwise, they break even.’<sup>10</sup>

Hands on Learning has operated for 25 years. It is currently delivered in 145 primary and secondary schools in Tasmania, Victoria, NSW, Queensland and Western Australia, supporting 2440 students at risk of disengagement, 43 per cent of whom are in primary school.

Hands on Learning was first piloted in Tasmania in 2017 and supported to grow across Tasmania by a partnership between the Tasmanian Community Fund, DECYP and partner schools between 2021-23, and since 2024, by an extended partnership with DECYP and partner schools. The role played by DECYP in enabling Tasmanian students and schools to benefit from Hands on Learning has been significant, and provides a valuable platform for further efforts to expand the impact of Hands on Learning and other initiatives to lift student engagement across the state.

Attachment 1 provides an overview of Hands on Learning. Attachment 2 includes **confidential** 2023 Tasmanian program and outcomes data.

**Cool4School** supports primary school-aged students to improve their ability to self-regulate and engage positively in the classroom with support from a Child Development Specialist. It is an intensive support program that works holistically with children, parents and schools. A 2019 evaluation found that all students had improved outcomes, which included improved wellness, stronger connection to school and improved life chances, better understanding and responses to their emotions, improved classroom attendance and engagement in school activities, and improvement in dealing with stressful situations.

Cool4School has been delivered in Tasmania since 2017. Attachment 3 provides an overview of Cool4School. Attachment 4 includes **confidential** responses from program participants, in their own words, to a consultation question intended to respond to the review’s focus.

### Further information

Attachments 2 (Hands on Learning 2023 data) and 4 (Cool4School participant responses) contain confidential information. We request that they not be published or directly quoted from in the review’s report. We would be happy to provide more detail on request.

In addition to the confidential responses in Attachment 4, we have encouraged students who we work with to complete the review’s survey or make a creative submission directly to the review.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://hundred.org/en/innovations/hands-on-learning-18a27ce9-e484-4def-b76a-57d851f023f7>.

<sup>10</sup> dandolopartners, 2022, *An independent analysis of Hands on Learning*, <https://handsonlearning.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Hands-on-Learning-Independent-analysis.pdf>.



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