

Response from The Friends' School

Prepared in collaboration with staff from Early Learning through to Senior Secondary.

Introduction

As a starting point to our commentary, we would like to acknowledge the great privilege that students and staff at Friends' have in being part of a community, part of families and expectations where education is highly valued and supported. As an independent fee-paying school, we acknowledge and appreciate that from the outset, there is an investment from our families in the education of their children. As such, one may ask, what might the Tasmanian education system learn from The Friends' School, given the privileged position that we respond from? At Friends' we feel that we have a collective responsibility to contribute to the improvement of education for all Tasmanians, and we are deeply committed to those efforts.

In many ways, the current system services Friends' students well- they are engaged in their learning, achieve terrific outcomes and transition into their post-school destinations of choice, however there is so much that our students are prevented from achieving through a system that is limiting and not attending to their needs in a rapidly changing and challenging world. Our engagement with the International Baccalaureate in both the Primary years and as an alternative to the TCE in Years 11 and 12 addresses some of these challenges, however we see that in Tasmania, there is so much more opportunity for engaging all students in lifeworthy learning.

Whilst Friends' is known for its academic excellence, for its students being highly engaged in their learning and achieving great outcomes, to call this our greatest achievement would be a significant misinterpretation of what a Friends' education is all about. Academic success only partly defines the success of the school; when you scratch below the surface, our students, families and staff will attest to the recognition that **all** of our learners, with their diverse and unique approaches to learning, are valued and contributing members of this community. For Friends', true success is defined through the ways we belong, participate and contribute; and how we each live our lives in ways that reach beyond the self. Our students are valued members of the community, and as such they are engaged as active contributors. They know that beyond the walls and days of attending The Friends' School, they are empowered to make a difference in the world, in small and in significant ways.

It is this definition that declares our most important work; building education from the foundation of a connected and compassionate community fosters belonging, connection and relationship; a stance that recognises both safety and security as paramount in the process. We know that for learning to 'stick' - wellbeing must be attended to as the highest priority of a school, and as such is the most important foundation for successful engagement, motivation, achievement and success.

With relationships situated at the heart of practice, the second principle we understand to be fundamental to the success of every learner, is the belief in the intrinsic value and worth of each person. For Tasmania's young people right across our state, there is perhaps no more

important call to action than this. Recognising that every young person is differently skilled and able, leverages our significant responsibility as teachers; to find the spark and fan the flames of inspiration, motivation, ability and opportunity in order to enable all to flourish in unique, meaningful and relevant ways.

We believe that the 'bright lives' in DECYP's Strategic Plan should be the focus of all of our work on reforming the system. Education can and should be a mission of hope, and our young people should feel hopeful and optimistic about their bright futures. This will not come from continuing along the current path that we are currently on. The Tasmanian system could and should be a place of innovation and progress, where we trial forward thinking approaches that are grounded in the diverse communities that schools and systems are embedded within.

Below is a commentary from staff at Friends' to the prompts provided- some ideas are connected, some have value independently of others. We would be most happy to expand on these ideas and share our hopes and visions for all young Tasmanians.

Defining educational success

In today's complex and shifting educational landscape, amidst a chorus for a 'back to basics' agenda that focuses on education as a purely transactional process, we have accepted the challenge to think deeply about the purpose, process and possibilities of a Tasmanian education. In order to do this, we must act collectively, as we read widely, think deeply and rigorously research expanded definitions of what success is. To restrict the definition of educational success to mere numbers and grades is a simplistic, homogenising and potentially dangerous definition of what it means to be a successful contributing member of society - a reductionist and myopic view. Instead, to recognise that education is a complex, multifaceted, relational and cultural human endeavour, (not an impersonal delivery system), widens our view on the world and re-signifies every individual's place within it. For many young people in Tasmania, access to an education that sees and honours them for all their abilities, perspectives, gifts and talents, is quite simply out of reach. This pervasive reduction of success to grades, ranks and output scales, begs the question: In what other ways can we support our students to be successful?

To us, it is clear: success means having the skills to identify, pursue and achieve meaningful goals in life. To be curious and creative, to collaborate and problem solve and to be an active contributing member of society sits at the centre of all that we hope to achieve. Garnered by our Purpose and Concerns, these values define our actions and give identity to our approach, as we 'seek to help our students develop as people who will think clearly, act with integrity, make decisions for themselves, be sensitive to the needs of others and the environment, be strong in service and hold a global perspective.' Essential to a meaningful life, we recognise that these skills need to be embedded within the scholastic realm but also represented in the more-than-scholastic realm, realised through the many different opportunities and experiences that sit beneath our feet.

This agenda is distinctly different to the current discourse in Tasmanian educational circles where an overt and sustaining focus on 'drill and skill' direct instruction reigns superior; above all other pedagogical methods. We do not deny the pivotal significance of literacy in the education of our youngest citizens, however we are concerned with the myopic focus on 'the science of learning', presented as an omnipotent elixir for our current state of education. The current Tasmanian education system overtly recognises the scholastic, but fails to promote measures that truly value the wide collection of skills, knowledge and understandings that are essential for life. If the true measure of an education system is its young people's success in the world, we must heed this important call to action and find ways to recognise, measure and honour the skills and abilities that young people will need as they venture into society; if we don't report on these skills, they ultimately have no currency, and no potency.

"The last few decades have belonged to a certain kind of person with a certain kind of mind – computer programmers who could crank code, lawyers who could craft contracts, MBAs who could crunch numbers. But the keys to the kingdom are changing hands. The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind – creators and empathisers, pattern recognisers, and meaning makers. These people – artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers – will now reap society's richest rewards and share its greatest joys".

Daniel H Pink - A Whole New Mind

A strategy that equates success simplistically with a thriving economy and education with being able to undertake a position in the workforce ignores some important other successes- social cohesion, connection, community, a thriving natural environment, first nations knowledge and wisdom valued. Mechanistic and narrow educational foci will only continue to reinscribe the current disengagement and disenfranchisement with the system. A more holistic and connected success that attends to these parts is paramount.

Success at Friends' happens because we engage with families as part of our learning community. That learning is as part of the many sporting activities that students are engaged in, it is through the music concerts, through our community events. In looking at the broader system, a question to ask would be how is community being built? How are students and families encouraged to engage in education through the development of a sense of belonging and community? How do the co-curricular activities in school foster a sense of identity, belonging and success, for example?

When students leave a school community at the end of Year 6 and the end of Year 10, which is for most Tasmanian students, how are they and their families connected to these new communities? How is identity and belonging developed and held within those communities. The College system and leaving a school community at the end of Year 10 is highly detrimental to fostering that sense of connection and belonging. The transition to Year 7 is also pivotal. The transition from Year 10 to 11 needs to be accompanied by a strong pastoral care program that reaches down from the colleges and supports students as they transition.

The narrative that exists in the broader community is that success equals academic success- meeting those measures of scholastic achievement, however the reality is that, for the majority of students, those measures are not motivating and do not come close to describing the attributes and capabilities that they have. As many states are currently exploring, Tasmania should be working at developing a learner profile, accompanied by a portfolio that clearly articulates, using a strength-based approach, the ways in which a young person is capable.

It is no wonder, without the sense of engagement, belonging and connection, and without their successes being recognised that disengaged students want to escape from their experience of school.

School's should be the 'new church' a place of connection making for young people and families, a place that holds them and gives them- students and families direction, support and a sense of community, offering shared services, education programs and opportunities to realise success in a variety of ways, not necessarily scholastic.

Strengthening supports and engagement for all learners at all stages of their education

Engagement and motivation are the first ports of call.

We need to acknowledge that one size does not fit all students. One area that highlights this is in the area of access and inclusion that currently shows that between 25-35% of our students are neurodivergent, and having to navigate systems and structures that have been established for neurotypical learners.

Schools need to feel safe- that wellbeing, belonging and connection come first, and learning will follow, as these things are pre-cursors to engagement.

We believe that early intervention is key- building community in Kinder and Prep, and even before, engaging families in ways that are not only about traditional learning- for many families, this in itself is difficult for them to navigate given their own experiences.

At Friends' we have a strong belief in ensuring that partnerships- between parents students and school are actively engaged and a key area of focus for our work. The review should

look at ways to strengthen this partnership, rather than isolating one of these important stakeholders and their inter-related interests.

It is important for the review to consider how the systems can support the teacher workforce and garner improved outcomes by highlighting the challenges for schools and communities to access clinicians and allied health to provide expert advice on how to meet the needs of students. The reality is that teachers and school leaders have a particular expertise and in order to do our jobs properly, timely expert advice is essential. Schools do not have the capacity, knowledge or experience to meet the needs of all. Building supportive and accessible extended networks beyond the school gates not only benefits teachers and schools, but also communities as a whole.

We feel that the current system is broken and needs some radical change. We need to educate families to see the value in education as the incentive to invest in education is lost. For people who come from generations of disadvantage, we need a different approach to support families to engage.

We need to ensure that there is a low bar of entry to become part of the community- this can't be an invitation to read to a class. Sport is a wonderful and under-utilised avenue toward engagement, but sports in community cost money to engage- how can we create low/ no cost opportunities for students to engage in a rich school sports program?

How can we make schools centres of learning, technology hubs and places with shared services so that students and families can feel connected and see that connection as worthwhile, and overcome the barriers of non-engagement.

How can we find reciprocal benefit - families as part of the community and schools linked to families? We need to invest in what holds these communities together. One model doesn't fit all communities- so we need to build from the community and what it values and can offer- rather than as an imposition

Outcomes at the conclusion of the formal years of schooling

Whilst we have outlined many of these ideas in previous points, we feel that in addition to this we need to be identifying potential pathways and engagements for students at Year 8/9. For example, we need to look to engage students in pathways that engage them rather than persisting with learning, pedagogies and learning outcomes that are disengaging. Within a specific context that is engaging and relevant, students are motivated to learn. This might look, for example, like starting VET pathways earlier, or at least engaging in VET style learning that could see students experiencing success. The Big Picture learning design has great outcomes with this.

We need to do more for the increasing number of school refusers offering government support for re-engagement. The engagement team needs to be active now across the primary years as well as the secondary years.

Further to this we need to broaden the definition and the metrics of success to beyond the scholastic. Without doing this, there will not be the motivation for young people to continue to engage.

We need to attend to the issues that arise from the disjointing and disconnection in the transitions between Years 6 and 7 and between 10 and 11. Leaving school communities at these important points means that there needs to be significant work in building community, belonging and connection.

Years 7-10 should not be a rehearsal for Year 11 and 12- there should be pedagogies and structures that are distinctly designed for adolescent learners. Active engagement rather than passive recipients, connecting with mentors, exciting and engaged learning connected to the real world, and in service to community that make it all relevant. Sitting in a classroom for hours doing worksheets rarely motivates our most successful learners, let alone those who have not found any success with this traditional mode of learning.

We must focus on engagement rather than on grades, on maintaining motivation and this requires some radical shifts.

When compared to other state systems, the TCE is incredibly limiting. Offering only one year course and with the structure of the delivery and assessment of these courses weighted so strongly in favour of assessment and comparability rather than on learning. With the emphasis on the exam, and the course itself a rehearsal for the exam, it is not hard to see how un motivating this is. With other states having more emphasis on learning, a greater diversity of ways of demonstrating and assessing learning.

Support for our teaching workforce

Teachers need to feel safe. Teachers need to feel equipped - we need to invest in their social and emotional wellbeing.

Staff need to have autonomy to make the best decisions for students and families

We need to work on improving teacher engagement. Teachers also need a sense of belonging and community and this means a redefinition of what the role of the teacher is- and essential to this is the importance of building relationships.

We need to find the right definitions and metrics of success for teachers- the impact that they are having- not NAPLAN data- we should publish the data about engagement and belonging - and celebrate the successes of this work. Growth?

Professional learning opportunities are limited in Tasmania, along with the substantial resources that are taken up when teachers engage in professional development- but this must be a priority.

There is so much research that reinforces the correlation between teacher/ student relationships and outcomes, and yet we focus all of our attention on programs, not on relationships. The Science of Learning trend at the moment is a good example of this.

We need to see an attitude change of families toward teachers. How can we make teaching a highly valued profession? Why do our strong students not wish to become teachers?

A further area of need is in school leadership. With increasing numbers of teachers retiring, there are growing numbers of positions available, but school leadership is not a desirable role, with its pressures, stresses and lack of community support.

We need to work more with our pre-service teachers in their most important work- developing strong relationships with students that support learning. What is offered to pre-service teachers in their training- with a focus on relationships. One opportunity is that we offer teaching in an apprenticeship model- combining studies with an apprenticeship in relationship with students, teachers and schools. The current model of training teachers is far too academic and doesn't motivate our new teachers- or give them enough experience in the work of teaching.

More also need to have a more consistent approach to supporting teachers to become fully registered. This is a laughable situation compared to other states.

What role is the university playing in supporting our teachers- both current and pre-service teachers? How can we work collaboratively together for the betterment of all parties?

Accountability for improved outcomes/ enabling our young people to thrive

The language of mandates and 'evidenced based research' ignores the context in which implementation is occurring. There is no evidence currently, for example, that the current emphasis on explicit direct instruction for reading will result in better outcomes for Tasmanian students. In a system where disengagement of students is already high, are we focusing on the right things?

We believe that systems should not be foisting mandates on the teachers and schools, rather provide them with the time and the space, empowering them to develop effective ways of engaging students in learning.

Teachers and schools need to have a say in developing the way forward for strategies and implementation at the ground level

When initiatives are implemented, how are they resourced? Is there really enough time and space- we need to be strategic about implementation before you actually get to the point of trying to implement. Successful implementation means significant time, money, support.

How is the community brought along and included? Where is the student voice? Have some conversations with students

One of the points that we often note as a learning community is that policies and mandates are so often worded in terms of the program, the learning, and they ignore the essential element here- the learner. We need to be putting the human beings, their hearts, minds and bodies at the heart of those mandates- no human being thrives through a program of learning.

Other ideas

Networks and Sharing

What role does hybrid learning have to play- where teacher expertise is spread across schools? There are many gains to be made by fostering collaboration among small schools through hybrid teaching models that pool expertise, particularly in teacher specialisations. By allowing students from different schools to join a single class—whether in-person or online—schools can ensure that all students have access to specialist teachers, even in subjects where staffing shortages or geographical limitations exist. This approach broadens educational opportunities by leveraging online platforms, where students from multiple schools can engage in the same lesson, while still maintaining a strong in-classroom experience for those on-site. Such a model could promote equitable access to high-quality teaching and a more diverse curriculum, helping smaller schools overcome resource constraints and enhance learning outcomes.

Celebrate what is working and build on those strengths- find the pockets of innovation that are having a direct impact on engagement and illuminate those.

Find ways of connecting and sharing across systems- there are great examples of this across Australia that show that cross-sectoral collaboration benefits all teachers and learners.

The National and Global Agendas

When you look at the Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Declaration and the work of the OECD in the past several years, it is clear that we need to shift our focus in a rapidly changing and evolving world. The focus has most clearly been on putting wellbeing, both individual and collective at the centre of all that education is aiming to achieve. Our current system does not do this and we simply can't keep tinkering at the edges of a broken system. No strategy or implementation drive is going to shift the engagement, motivation and success cycle unless the core of wellbeing is addressed.

We can learn much from South Australia and their recent review and implementation cycles that put the thriving of our young people as the central focus of education. We know that when our children and young people look at SA and the way in which they valued education and put it at the centre

Tasmania, as a small and diverse system, has an incredible opportunity to be a leader in Australia in making radical shifts and changes for the benefit of our children and young

people. We have a unique opportunity to make a real difference, with a population the size of Tasmania, the tipping point for positive change is both essential and within our reach.

Consistency and Positivity in Government and Public Narratives About Education

A further concern that needs to be addressed is the public narrative about education. From governments, politicians and departments, the narrative is a negative one and there needs to be a clear direction that sees the public support for teachers and education systems and not just when there is 'good' news.

One of the issues for Tasmania's education system is that there have been no strong throughlines that are carried through and across governments and there is an enormous amount of cynicism about the real value of education that is held by public officials.

Many elements discussed in the commentary above were highlighted in DECYP's [Year 7-10 Curriculum Framework](#) which held such promise for a progressive way forward and serve as an example of a throughline that was heading in the right direction but lost momentum and support.

Thank you for taking the time to read our submission, as you will note from our considered response, the education of all Tasmanian children is a matter that sits close to our hearts. It is an agenda too important to ignore and will require some deep thinking, radical shifts and commitment from the political sphere... an agenda that rests in all our hands.