

Richmond Public Policy Group

CHANGING ATTITUDES IN TASMANIAN EDUCATION

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Tasmanian education has been the subject of intense debate in recent months involving academics, teachers, politicians and members of the wider community. The focus of public attention has been on the poor comparative performance of local schools and particularly the failure of many students to complete year twelve. Particularly pressing is the evidence that in this regard the Island falls far below the standard reached by all the mainland states. There is generally an appreciation that this situation represents a serious loss of potential both for the individuals in question and local society as a whole. There is clearly a strong communal sense that something must be done.

The facts of the case have been well and widely presented based on national statistics which put the assessment beyond reasonable doubt that Tasmania has a significant problem. The ongoing debate has generated useful suggestions for re-examining Tasmania's education policies. However while the symptoms are well canvassed, the diagnosis remains rudimentary. Without a serious analysis of the underlying causes of the current situation reform will not be possible. Assessment to date has lacked sufficient sense of history and it has failed to place Tasmania in either its correct demographic or sociological context.

At the heart of the debate is the interstate comparison. It is the most telling statistic which more than anything else spurs Tasmanians into action. There is a sense of shame about the failure to measure up to the achievements of the mainland states. It calls up that abiding sense of being left behind, that historic tradition of insular anxiety. But such comparisons hide as much as they reveal. Tasmania is one of the units of the federation and shares many common characteristics with the sister states. And comparison is facilitated by the way statistics are compiled and published. But the differences are equally important although not so immediately apparent.

If we seek valid comparisons Tasmania must be considered as part of regional not of metropolitan Australia. The facts speak for themselves. Hobart is the smallest capital by a long shot. It is now Australia's eleventh most populous city. It is less than one fifth the size of Adelaide the smallest of the mainland capitals. It is one twentieth the size of Melbourne and Sydney. Tasmania has only three cities in the list of the 45 most populous towns in the country. And like many parts of regional

¹ COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS WELCOME

This discussion paper has been prepared by the RICHMOND PUBLIC POLICY GROUP, an informal network of individuals committed to more open debate about the direction of Tasmanian public policy. We value your comments which will be used to assist us finalise our representations to the Tasmanian Government, Opposition and other community leaders to stimulate new ways of approaching education and training policy development in Tasmania.

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Australia it has a much smaller migrant component of the population than is the case in the capital cities. It also shares continuing out-migration with many other regional areas.

To compare like with like Tasmanian performance should be measured against those large regional districts which are the hinterlands of the second rank Australian cities like Townsville, Cairns and Toowoomba in Queensland, Wollongong and Newcastle in New South Wales or Geelong in Victoria. A comparative study, for example, matching Tasmania with Townsville and the Herbert-Burdekin region and Newcastle and the Hunter would provide us with a more realistic set of statistics to assess. It may be that what is currently seen as Tasmanian problems may be ones shared right across regional Australia.

Another feature of the current debate about educational attainment is the close focus on the school and the class room. Insufficient attention is devoted to the very much larger problem of social and economic inequality. Innumerable studies in both Australia and overseas have established the strong correlation between inequality and educational failure. Without significant structural change schools can only do so much to even up children's life chances. And this reality is particularly pertinent to Tasmania. Relative poverty is widespread and concentrated geographically. Its impact is compounded as a result. But changing society is a much bigger task than reforming class room practice or trying new methods of instruction. And a career in pedagogy is not necessarily a preparation for the far larger and more taxing challenge of bringing about significant social reform. But to concentrate entirely on the school rather than the structure of society is to lead to pre-determined disappointment. Inequality itself is the principal reason for unrealized potential not the nature of the schools or the quality of the teaching. And inequality is increasing as many recent studies have convincingly established. There is as well a marked regional dimension to the inequality. Much of the enhanced wealth accrues to a small elite living in the mainland capitals, particularly Melbourne and Sydney. Even in Tasmania regional disparities are accentuated with the well to do, tertiary educated, re-colonising the inner city suburbs where property values spiral upwards compounding their advantage. Meanwhile the outer suburbs and many of the rural areas fall farther behind. In the recent study on regional disadvantage in Australia called Dropping off the Edge the researchers found that between 2007 and 2015 there had been an increase in social disadvantage across the 29 local government areas.

The problem of educational inequality has at various times over the forty years called forth programmes of reform. The Whitlam governments Schools Commission was designed to counter the marked geographical disparities in educational opportunity and attainment. The Gonski Report of 2012 addressed the same problems and came up with findings particularly relevant to the current debate. While finding that Australia's comparative performance had declined in recent years the committee determined that the performance gap between the highest and lowest performing students was far greater in Australia than in many other OECD countries. There was, what the Commissioners decided, an unacceptable link between low achievement and social class. The relevance of these findings for Tasmania is obvious.

The reforms suggested by Gonski could help improve Tasmanian educational performance so it is essential that community leaders urge the Federal Government to fully implement this programme. However the way in which extra funding is deployed locally must be closely monitored to ensure reform is actively addressing educational inequality.

So what are the major areas of education reform that should be addressed? While there is much comment and public discussion about the problems of school retention and standards of literacy and numeracy, there seems no specific agreement about the best way to implement change. Engaging the community- teachers, parents, future employers and community leaders- is an important initiative. However, perhaps the most neglected area of consultation is with senior students themselves as they are the people who have the most recent experience of the education system so they will have very relevant information for future planning.

- How do students rate their learning experience?
- Why do some choose to leave at the end of Grade 10?

- What curriculum and teaching methods would encourage students to complete Grade 11 and 12?
- Do family economic pressures influence early school leaving
- What kind of vocational training do students want for their futures?
- If offered the choice which would be preferred –extension of Grade 11 and 12 within rural schools or increased numbers of community colleges?
- How are students briefed on their post school training options?
- Does the school system adequately support all students through the application process?

In addition to integrating student opinion into its planning processes, the Education Department needs to ask how well students are skill ready to take advantage of the wide variety of post school training options. Is it already too late to influence the choices young people will be making as we approach the end of the 2015 school year?

For many Tasmanian students there is a family tradition of formal school completion which is the logical pathway to higher education and training for a chosen career. But we are assuming that all students have enjoyed at least some level of success during their school years. However we know that young peoples' experience within our school system varies considerably. Some are challenged but overcome learning difficulties to progress more slowly, while others equate education with failure reinforced by constant reminders that they will not reach expected academic standards.

Other very able students become bored with standardised learning environments which do not necessarily extend their capabilities. While education theory may preach diversity and individual learning styles the reality for too many students is that they become disengaged from education. It is easy to blame students, teachers or parents without examining an education system that needs to better adapt its curriculum and teaching methods so that all students can benefit from their school years.

As well as listening to senior students as consumers, it is essential to create dialogue with parents, teachers and community leaders who will be the employers and colleagues of young people entering the workforce. Here we need to break down the barriers between formal and practical learning because many older Tasmanians have succeeded with lower levels of education and we need to respect their achievements. However at the same time we must value educational opportunity for young people who need the skills to face complex future challenges. With a focus on a community learning environment it is possible to combine the expertise of older generations with new knowledge acquired by young people.

We need to recognise the importance of localising the educational experience within communities so that students are not isolated within institutions that set them apart from their daily lives. This gives formal learning so much more relevance when students can use their newly acquired skills to solve local problems. Tasmania has experience of pioneering this approach with the establishment of the Hagley Farm School eighty years ago. Yet we seem uncertain about extending such innovative practice to meet the needs of students in 2015.

If community focussed education is to succeed there must be a serious analysis of vocational training and how it responds to local labour markets. There is an urgent need to rethink how well our current system of technical and further education is working in tandem with the provision of apprenticeships and traineeships to prepare young people for a changing workforce. Any casual scanning of Federal and State departmental websites reveals an apparently impressive range of training options in so many key industries. Yet there are constant complaints by business leaders that the school environment is inadequate in preparing young people to take up these opportunities. At the same time some students and their families are equally critical that many pathways are limited and not always tailored to provide the most relevant training.

- So what is the problem and how can we ensure that Federal and State skills training investment is benefitting all Tasmanian school leavers?
- Are there effective procedures in place to provide senior students with the information and support to access appropriate training and maintain commitment to completion?
- How do we gauge the success of available training programs?
- How many Tasmanian students are enrolled in the Australian School Based Apprenticeship Scheme?
- Who is monitoring the standards of independent registered training organisations?
- How do their success rates compare with government training bodies like TAFE?

The Federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham has indicated he wants to lift the status of vocational training so that students recognise the benefits of either a university or vocational pathway to gaining qualifications

It is unfortunate that our traditional approach to post school education has created a hierarchical system that assumes a university education is “better than” one acquired through TAFE or other training bodies. Just as we should have more respect for diversity in the classroom there must be greater recognition of vital skills acquired through more practical vocational training.

In addition to all the current industry training options listed on the Skills Tasmania website there is potential to innovate in response to particular Tasmanian characteristics. As the state with more built heritage than the mainland we should be leading the way in training young people to acquire restoration skills, many of which are disappearing as seasoned heritage tradespeople retire. We have a well-earned reputation in the arts and crafts as showcased in numerous galleries, exhibitions, retail outlets and markets throughout the state. But how much thought is given to ensuring Tasmania builds on this natural advantage and train young people to take their place in a vibrant creative arts and crafts industry? Similarly the number of Tasmanian publications produced annually is as impressive as the numbers of celebrated writers based in the state so there is another opportunity to offer talented young people the opportunity to train and work with mentors.

In the current school retention debate we need to be both proactive in trialling new approaches but confident in what Tasmania can achieve. Too frequently we lament the negatives of our size demographics and poverty. Certainly these characteristics of our state’s economy do provide policy makers with particular challenges that must be addressed. However at the same time community leaders must also recognise the positive features of a small decentralised state where so many Tasmanians are combining old and new skills to create specialist products and innovative industries.

School retention and raising standards of literacy and numeracy are significant challenges for the entire community. However we need to work much more closely with young people themselves to discuss what will encourage them to continue their education. We must also expect more diligent analysis by governments of our current school and vocational training systems to ensure that young people are in fact receiving the education and training they deserve.