



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Tasmanian Council of Social Services (TasCOSS)
Submitting as a: Peak body
State: Tas.

Summary

TasCOSS, the Tasmanian Council of Social Service, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools. This year, we were commissioned by the Tasmanian Government to consult with families, schools, and the community sector about barriers and enablers to education engagement in Tasmania. Our state is regionally dispersed and economically and educationally disadvantaged in a way that makes it distinct from much of Australia.

The consultation—which included 49 parents and young people, 37 service providers and stakeholders in the community, 12 school principals and centre leaders, and 6 educators—is the basis of these recommendations. As the peak body for the community sector in Tasmania, we also consulted directly with our membership when preparing this submission.

Summary of recommendations

Some Tasmanian students face multiple and complex barriers to learning, due to deep socio-economic disadvantage. These non-education barriers to learning are best addressed through increased access to school support staff, such as social workers, psychologists, speech pathologists, and teacher's aides, and these services should be the target of additional funds. Better coordination and collaboration between schools and the community sector can further support students.

TasCOSS refers to its own consultations and the extensive research literature to emphasise that parents are leaders and experts in their children's learning. The degree of family engagement in children's learning is known to have a strong relationships with childhood vulnerability, developmental outcomes, and post-school destinations. Schools, and Tasmania's network of Child and Family Centres, have developed local initiatives in this area, and these programmes and practices should be the target of 'bottom-up' evaluation.

TasCOSS further emphasises the value of a shared evidence base in supporting ongoing improvement in schools, for the benefit of all students.

Main submission

Parents, schools, community: Submission to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Context

Tasmanian children and young people continue to leave school earlier and with fewer qualifications than their peers in all other Australian states. Tasmania's apparent retention rate from year 7 to year 12 is 74.7%, compared to a national rate of 84.0% (Productivity Commission [PC], 2017, table 4A.42). By attainment, the gap is

wider still: 51% of the Tasmanian year 12 age cohort earned a year 12 certificate in 2015, compared to 75% nationwide (PC, 2017, table 4A.109). Further, the difference between low- and high-SES rates of attainment in Tasmania is wider than nationally: 19% in Tasmania, as a proportion of the respective age cohorts, compared to 10% nationwide (PC, 2017, table 4A.108).

Despite these outcomes, consultations with families, young people, schools and service providers demonstrate the high value placed on education participation and attainment in the Tasmanian community. What is also clear is that multiple and complex barriers at a family, community and school level work against children and young people's full participation in learning.

Submission question: What does educational success for Australian students and schools look like?

TasCOSS believes that all Australian young people should have equal opportunities in life, and all children should be able to access an excellent education, irrespective of any other factors that may contribute to disadvantage.

Submission questions: What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time? Are there barriers to implementing these improvements? [including sub-questions]

Through its consultations with parents, school leaders and educators, service providers, community stakeholders, and our membership, TasCOSS has identified opportunities for policy change which could benefit all Australian students and schools.

Schools should be part of a community of support

Tasmania is characterised by its dispersed and socio-economically disadvantaged population. TasCOSS heard that many Tasmanian students face multiple and complex barriers to their learning, of the kind which teachers alone are not necessarily trained to address. Students who experience poverty or family violence cannot be expected to arrive at the school gate able to engage. Additionally, families in rural and remote locations face barriers to accessing services and supports, including distance, cost, and poor public transport.

Part of the role of schools is then to provide services where barriers to access exist, and further in connecting families into other supports in their communities. School support staff, such as psychologists, social workers, speech pathologists, and teacher's aides, are of acute importance. However, TasCOSS heard in its consultations that support staff in high-disadvantage schools work under high caseloads, and this may impede the therapeutic and learning outcomes of students.

Non-educational-based barriers to learning are not the responsibility of schools alone. Community services exist to support families in many of these families, but

principals and teachers are not always aware of what services are available, and how to access formal and informal referral pathways. Closer collaboration and information sharing between schools and the community sector can deliver benefits to learning.

Recommendations

- That, due to the correlated socio-economic and health determinants of educational outcomes, support staff such as social workers, school psychologists, speech pathologists, and teacher's aides be available to all students in low-SES schools, and that supply is sufficient to meet demand with meaningful therapeutic outcomes.
- Disengagement be addressed with an emphasis on prevention and early intervention, including and especially through adequate access to these support staff pre-kindergarten, in kindergarten, and throughout primary school.
- For schools to play an increased role connecting families into community services in their region.

Engaging families with learning

Parents are leaders and experts in their children's education. Research into Tasmanian schools has shown that children whose parents are highly engaged in their schooling are 91% less likely to be developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain, as per the AEDC, compared to children whose parents were somewhat engaged (ABS 2014). Parental engagement in learning is the strongest protective factor identified in this research. Further Tasmanian work has observed that low parent-child connectedness about school is more closely correlated with expectations of leaving school before year 12 than family socio-economic status (Hay et al. 2016).

Parental engagement has been associated with academic achievement, participation in extra classes and programs, attainment and graduation rates, school attendance, social skills, behaviour in school, adaptation to school, social capital, personal competence and efficacy in learning, engagement in school work, belief in the importance of education, and participation in post-school training and education (Emerson et al., 2012).

TasCOSS heard in its consultation of several innovative examples of promoting parent engagement in schooling. For some parents in highly disadvantaged suburbs and towns, schools can be perceived as unwelcoming or intimidating places, due to personal history and the place of schools as the most present and visible government institution in their local community. Many examples of school practice

to promote parent engagement was oriented towards shifting this culture, and were low in resource demand.

One primary school principal described a programme of the school which required all teachers to phone home once a month with something positive to say to a parent about his or her child; the simple intention of the programme was to maintain lines of communication and bolster beliefs that schools are a positive environment among parents. Later, if a difficult call has to be made, there is not the automatic expectation that contact from the school was disciplinary.

Perhaps the most prominent example of successful parent and community engagement is found in Tasmania's Child and Family Centres (CFCs). Tasmania's twelve CFCs are located in disadvantaged communities, and are designed to support the families of young children. Evaluation affirms that CFCs are "informal, accessible, responsive, non-judgemental and supportive places where people felt valued, respected and safe", and centre users were more likely to report that local services for parents were convenient, helpful, and timely, and that these services cooperated and worked closely together (Taylor et al., 2015). The CFC model has been found to exceed the simple co-location of services, and includes shared vision and understanding between services and the local community, and genuine community engagement (Centre for Community Child Health, 2017).

TasCOSS found that CFCs accommodate the individual needs of families in disadvantaged communities; some, for example, had a vehicle centre staff would use to pick up parents and children from their homes, as not all families have access to personal or public transport. Part of the success of CFCs has been to recruit staff and centre leaders from local communities, and to place community and family partnerships at the heart of their work. Evaluation supported that the type of support offered by CFCs be extended to primary school-age children, to realise the benefits of holistic community engagement in schools (Taylor et al., 2015). TasCOSS supports the CFC model, and believes their success can inform family and community engagement in the school system nationwide.

Recommendations

- Innovative schools and Tasmania's Child and Family Centres have many small-scale examples of family engagement practices and connecting community into schools. 'Bottom up' evaluation can establish what works to engage families, including highly disadvantaged groups, which can then be scaled up across many schools.

Build the evidence base

TasCOSS supports the recommendations contained in the Productivity Commission's National Education Evidence Base report, regarding the policy and institutional setting to encourage evidence-based policy and practice in Australian schools.

This report makes important observations about ‘bottom-up’ evaluation of practice in Australian schools. From its consultation, TasCOSS believes our schools can also learn from alternative education programmes which target disengaged students through this process. The types of hands-on, experiential learning we saw in these programmes may benefit broad swathes of Australia’s students, and should not be restricted to the small number of disengaged students who find themselves in these programmes. Extending these practices into mainstream schools is a kind of pedagogical ‘early intervention’, and reduces the stigma of alternative learning methods under the present system.

Recommendations

- The recommendations of the Productivity Commission’s National Education Evidence Base report be implemented.
- That educational practice in alternative programmes may benefit inclusive pedagogy in all Australian schools, and that this be evaluated through the form of ‘bottom up’ evaluation the Productivity Commission recommends.

Citations

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