

Proposed Education changes a positive step forward for Tasmanian children
11 April 2016

The proposed changes to the Tasmanian Education Act will provide an improved educational framework for Tasmanian children including the recognition of a child's right to education and a focus on putting children first.

If there is one thing above all others that will make the biggest difference to Tasmania's future – it is that our young people's educational outcomes are improved. Our educational levels have lagged behind for far too long. Never before in history has education been more important.

So many positive outcomes for both the individual and the State are strongly linked to higher levels of educational achievement.

Proposed inclusions in the Bill which I believe are important include:

- the acknowledgement that every child has a right to receive an education until he or she completes Year 12 – this is a reminder to everyone involved in the provision of education to perform their duties and functions in a way that respects and promotes this right;
- the important role of parents;
- the importance of the provision by the State of universal access to education; and
- the importance of lifelong learning.

For the first time, we have a set of guiding principles which will assist to bring about a fundamental change in the way we view education and the way we view students – ultimately their wellbeing is at the centre.

The Bill includes acknowledgement of the importance of early quality pre-compulsory education and learning opportunities – kindergarten – and the lowering of the age at which schooling becomes compulsory. This means that beginning in 2020, a child who is 3 years and 6 months at the start of the year (i.e. they turn 4 by 30 June), may be enrolled in Kindergarten. These aspects are to be welcomed and they reflect the importance of lifelong learning.

Whilst the lowering of the compulsory school starting age has caused much discussion, what has been overlooked is that many children are already involved in early learning at childcare or other programs. For these children, starting earlier at school strengthens their learning journey.

However for the children whose parents can't afford childcare or early learning programs, an earlier start for school will be beneficial. There is considerable evidence supporting the benefit of high quality early learning such as the

Launching into Learning Longitudinal Study, Progress Report 2013, Tasmanian Department of Education, 2014 which found that: “Students from all socioeconomic backgrounds made significant gains in educational performance from regular participation in Launching into Learning. However, students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds benefited most.”

The message from this and other research is that if we want to give our children an equal opportunity to maximise their potential, it is vital we do everything possible to strengthen their early development.

Some critics of this proposal cite the example of Finland and other Scandinavian countries where the school starting age is 7. This is misleading however, as this implies that children are not involved in learning before this, which is not the case. Finland has high quality early childhood and care programs which are available to all children aged 1-5 years and are free or at a low cost via means-testing. Finnish children are involved in these early learning programs before they begin compulsory school. Also, as we know these countries have a much higher taxation regime.

Another proposed aspect of the Bill is home schooling. When children are home schooled it is important that all receive a quality education and consequently the need for robust system of registration including Standards. The ability for a child to be enrolled part-time in formal schooling as part of a home education program is to be applauded – this will also enable a child who is better suited to home schooling to also benefit from engagement with peers for part of their learning.

A related and beneficial change is the proposal to formalise arrangements whereby a student with disability can be enrolled in both a mainstream and specialist school. This represents a way of promoting the educational participation of students with disability and a practical example of how the right to education for children with disability can be realised in a non-discriminatory manner.

Another excellent innovation is the proposed changes to truancy or non-attendance. There will be a new compulsory conciliation conference process for both the government and non-government school sectors where school-based attempts have failed to resolve non-attendance. Mediators will explore the reasons why a young person is not attending and has disengaged from education.

Compulsory conciliation conferences should, in my view, always aim to involve the young person as well as their parents and any relevant professionals who may be able to provide insight into the reasons for non-attendance and assistance with solutions.

The involvement of a young person is reflective of the young person’s right to be heard and have a say in decisions affecting their lives. It is fundamental to the acknowledgement that education is one of the very important rights of the child.

Parental engagement in a child’s education and learning and aspirations is crucial. It can make the difference between a child struggling and disengaging or thriving and attaining the education qualifications required to become a productive member of our community.

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