

Success for every young person: reaching beyond the rhetoric

As Director-General of Queensland's Department of Education, it is my privilege to lead a schooling system which aims to support every young Queenslander to progress through school and transition to further study or work. Of course, such rhetoric only means something if we undertake precise and evidence-based measures to realise such an ambitious goal. In Queensland, we are doing the important work, and seeing promising results.

Tony Cook PSM | Director-General, Department of Education, Queensland

Equity and excellence first

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reports that successful education systems are those that prioritise excellence and equity to ensure all children can access a good-quality education (OECD, 2012).

Such a focus on excellence and equity is central to our approach in Queensland. And when it comes to equitable opportunities, Queensland schools have much to celebrate. Recently our schools have seen significant improvements in outcomes for Indigenous students, high retention to Year 12, and some of the best improvements in NAPLAN across Australia.

But there is room for further improvement. While most of our Year 12 completers achieve their post-Year 12 goals, a number do not¹. Like all other jurisdictions in Australia, Queensland aims to increase the number of students who succeed at school, and transition to further study or work.

The Queensland Government recently set a target to achieve 91 per cent of young people engaged in education, employment or training by 2022. This is an ambitious target, but a necessary one. We want every young person to prosper and to contribute to our society because the social and economic cost of disengagement is too great (Lamb & Huo, 2017).

An evidence-based plan

In Queensland, the Department of Education has a plan to provide every young Queenslander with the great school they deserve and to lift outcomes for every young person. Our plan is based on analysis of our data to identify where we can *shift the dial* with respect to engagement, and is informed by research of what works in practice.

¹ See for example, Next Steps Survey of Year 12 completers

² See Our Future State: Advancing Queensland Priorities



Our plan for youth engagement

Every student succeeding in inclusive, high-quality mainstream schools

We need to retain the vast majority of our students in their local schools because we know that every strong school system has this approach at its foundation. When students remain and thrive in their mainstream schools, they enjoy uninterrupted learning and a sense of belonging.

In line with our goal for every student to have access to a high-quality school, our state school strategy, *Every student succeeding*, lays out our commitment to high-quality differentiated teaching and learning. This commitment is more than words: we dedicate resources to support our schools, including guidance officers, literacy and numeracy specialists, school-based health nurses, therapists, behaviour support teachers, mental health coaches, and other specialist staff.

We also provide support through research centres such as Centres for Learning and Wellbeing, the Autism Hub, and the Reading Centre. Supported by these resources, school teams work together to recognise early warning signs and provide targeted intervention to support students to stay at school and succeed³. Our research and analysis has identified schools that achieve academic gain and have fewer students who exit early. We want to learn from these high-performing schools and scale-up their inclusive practices and capabilities that contribute to their success.

FlexiSpaces

Recently we introduced *FlexiSpace* trials in a targeted number of schools to support them in providing a differentiated environment for students who are experiencing challenges. These spaces are inclusive, high-quality built environments, with high-impact teaching and learning. FlexiSpaces aim to re-integrate students into their mainstream settings⁴. An independent evaluation of attendance and attainment data shows early signs of promise, with increased attendance and signs of improved academic gain. Our goal is to roll-out FlexiSpaces in up to 52 state schools across Queensland by 2022.

Success coaches

A number of our schools have also introduced *Success Coaches*. These coaches have a dedicated role to build trust, identify and remove potential barriers to study, and mentor and advocate for students who are experiencing challenges in their mainstream school.

³ See Youth Engagement Practice Insights

⁴ View a series of videos on FlexiSpaces



Support high-quality alternative settings

Despite efforts to differentiate learning environments, not all students thrive in mainstream schools. Alternative education settings⁵ provide an important option for some young people. The Queensland Government is committed to ensuring that alternative settings meet the highest quality standards and deliver strong transitions for their students.

A Statement of Commitment

Recently, I joined with Dr Lee-Anne Perry, Executive Director, Queensland Catholic Education Commission and David Robertson, Executive Director, Independent Schools Queensland, in signing *Quality pathways for all young people: A commitment to alternative education*⁶. This document outlines standards for alternative education settings, reflecting our shared commitment to an equitable schooling system that holds high expectations and delivers strong outcomes for every young Queenslander.

Showcasing Spotlight Schools

We also recently named ten alternative settings as *Spotlight Schools*. These Spotlight Schools enable the three education sectors to shine a light on good practice, providing insights for all educational settings on how schools can deliver high-quality learning environments and strong transitions for students experiencing complex challenges. We plan to collate and share these insights over the next six months.

Reaching and reconnecting disengaged⁷ students

A number of young people leave school early and succeed, particularly those who move into apprenticeships, traineeships or other forms of secure work or study. However, one in three early school leavers does not make a successful transition⁸.

Regional Youth Engagement Hubs

That's why we have Regional Youth Engagement Hubs operating across Queensland. These Hubs support young people, who are of compulsory age, to reconnect with school, and other forms of study, or work⁹. They provide a point of contact for any government agency, non-government agency or member of the community who wants to support a young person back into work or study.

Given Queensland's geography, this is an ambitious initiative¹⁰. There is still some work to be done to expand the reach of the Hubs, but early results show that the Hubs have succeeded in supporting some of our most at-risk students, with 366 young people in Youth Justice, and 931 Indigenous students supported in 2018. The Hubs will also support the work of our *Education Justice Initiative*. Modelled on the Education Justice Initiative in Victoria, we have recently introduced six court liaison officers throughout Queensland. These officers will work with young people before the Children's Court and their families to support the young person's successful engagement in education.

⁵ The term 'alternative setting' refers to school settings that deliver an option to young people who are not enrolled in the nearby school. Some prefer descriptions such as 'flexible', or 'adjacent'.

⁶ See <https://advancingeducation.qld.gov.au/youthEngagement/Documents/youth-engagement-statement-of-commitment.pdf>

⁷ The use of the word disengaged reflects terminology commonly used in the research. For example the ABS uses 'engaged in education, employment or training'. However, it is important to recognise that terminology should be used carefully as to avoid assigning blame to young people. Some prefer other terms such as 'detached' or 'disenfranchised'.

⁸ See Next Steps survey of early school leavers

⁹ Compulsory schooling and compulsory participation age are outlined in the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006.

¹⁰ A Navigator Program is being piloted in targeted sites throughout Victoria to support disengaged young people to reconnect with education. The goals of this program are similar to Regional Youth Engagement Hubs.



Engagement with young people and their parents/guardians

Research shows that working closely with families supports student learning (Hattie, 2009) and that the most important parent engagement is the engagement that occurs at a school level. But our research shows that many parents are also seeking online information about how to support their disengaged children.

Online support for parents/guardians

In response to this research, the department will soon launch a website to improve access to information and support for parents and guardians. The website content will be both engaging and practical, and using digital listening, will respond to the concerns of parents and guardians of Queensland school students.

Empowering young people

We also know that many young people do not currently use government websites to access information about educational options, particularly those young people who are disengaged. We are working with a non-government organisation to build a website that will respond to the youth voice and provide the right information to empower young people to make good decisions about their participation in education.

Launching Year 12 completers

The data shows that completing 12 years of schooling equates with the greatest chance of being successful in further work or study. Most of our Year 12 completers make a strong transition. However, our most recent destination survey shows that 13.7 per cent of our Year 12 completers are not in education, employment or training in the year after graduating. While some of these

young people have deferred a place at university, indicated they are taking a gap year from study, or are waiting for a job or study course to begin, many of these young people need extra support to make a transition¹¹.

Link and Launch program

The Link and Launch program involves placing specialist officers in participating schools to support Year 12 completers who are not in education, employment or training to transition to further study or work. The program will be delivered by 14 state schools operating in disengagement hotspots throughout Queensland, with up to 30 sites established by 2022. Though this work has only just begun, early success indicates that some Year 12 completers are able to make a transition when they are supported to navigate their potential pathways.

Intentional collaboration with other Queensland Government agencies

Schools play a vital role in supporting every child and young person to thrive and succeed. But schools cannot do it alone. Other agencies such as Youth Justice, Child Safety, Housing, Health, Employment, Small Business and Training and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships also play a role in supporting our children and young people to engage and re-engage.

Youth Engagement Alliance

We established a *Youth Engagement Alliance* comprising a range of government agencies with the intention of scaling-up collaborative practice across Queensland. Over the next year, we will map services across the state to create better partnerships across agencies, build a stronger evidence base of what works, establish consistent cross-agency performance indicators for youth engagement programs, and build toolkits to support collaboration.

¹¹ See for example, Next Steps Survey of Year 12 completers op cit.



THE WAY FORWARD

Since the Queensland Government set a target to lift the engagement of young people, we have seen improvement. The latest ABS data shows there was an increase of 8,700 young people engaged in study or work between 2018 and 2019. The youth labour market is volatile, and a range of external factors can affect levels of youth disengagement. However, these early signs are promising.

We want to build on this momentum. Equitable outcomes for every young person are the hallmark of a strong system. Achieving this requires both commitment and the highest level of professional skill across our schools and agencies. We know it's not easy work, but, we also know it's the right work.

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BIOGRAPHY

Tony Cook is Director-General, Department of Education, Queensland. Before joining the Queensland Department of Education in April 2018, Tony worked for the Australian public service as the Associate Secretary for Schools and Youth within the Department of Education and Training.

Tony began his career with Education Queensland before holding several senior executive positions in the Victorian public service.

In October 2013 Tony was made an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Council for Education Leaders, and in January 2014, he was awarded a Public Service Medal for outstanding public service, especially in driving schools policy and funding reform in Australia.

