

# LEARNING ALTERNATIVES: A LAST CHANCE OR A REAL CHOICE?

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## **The context**

Why ask this question, and why ask it now?

The language of choice permeates so many spaces: it's the touchstone of advertising; it's the lure of the supermarket; it's part of the magic of what we buy and what we do, and increasingly it's the currency of public policy debates.

But it is not just a metaphor - it is the most powerful driver of change in the way we live, consume and learn. It is the most persuasive thing that convinces us of our individual autonomy and it is the most powerful influence in shaping our identity. This is because our individual personality is increasingly tied to the degree of control we can exercise, or at least what we perceive we can exercise, over what we do. In this sense the temptation is to identify 'what we choose' as synonymous with 'who we are'.

In turn the notion of choice - often really just the illusion of choice - frames how we are governed, and how our public services are produced and delivered.

In some ways there are more choices for learners in education than ever before: more vocational openings, more subject choices, more providers to choose from, more stages of life to choose when to learn, more choices about how to pay for one's learning.

Choice, and the validity of what you choose, have been an important ingredients in the re-engineering of post-compulsory education and training that is taking place in nearly state and territory in Australia. Multiple and seamless pathways, effortless combinations of work and study, and even the notion of parity of esteem, are about opening up valid, robust choices.

From offering the I.B. across to doing VET, students have a wider and better customised range of choices. The effect of the reviews and policy statements - Kirby, Pitman, Futures Connect, the Learning State, and they go on - has been to widen the boundaries of what can be provided for senior students.

In nearly all instances though the expanded range of choices available to senior students has been built on an assumption that the educational fundamentals, at least to year 10, are largely in place.

In other important ways though our systems are actively limiting choice. Some of the states have, or are considering, moving to raise the school leaving age to 16 years. This imposes a profound limit on the extent to which young people can choose to stay in school or not. Some states like Queensland have toyed with a creative and worthwhile option - to dwell on participation in learning rather than compulsory schooling so that TAFE or VET or ACE or learning through work could be valid pathways for 16 and 17 year olds.

The states - and through the Youth Allowance arrangements, the Commonwealth - have been winding back the opportunities available to students to leave, and imposing more penalties if they do. At the same time the systems have been seeking to expand the range of choices and assert the autonomy of students once they have passed the schooling age threshold.

Restricting choice in this way begs the question as to the quality of the educational experience being offered to young people during the years of compulsory schooling, the diversity being offered, the rights they enjoy (especially if this is an arbitrary age-determined threshold) and the extent of their actual participation. We are interested in seeing how the metaphor of choice stands up in this legislative context, the reasons for imposing compulsion, and the space within it for some measure of choice and individual autonomy by learners.

### **The problem**

Our sense is that the educational needs of a sizeable number of young people are not being well catered for in conventional learning settings during the compulsory years. Practitioners tell us this group of young people is growing. Frequently the local response to students with challenging behaviours, learning difficulties, who 'don't fit' traditional schooling and may be at risk of leaving has been to transfer them to alternative settings, community schools and teaching units. A distinguishing feature very often of these settings is an attempt to develop a stronger connection with practical skills related to the world of work.

However these alternatives are chronically under recognised, under funded, precariously placed in the structure of education administration and generally considered marginal or outcast to mainstream schooling. As a result they are limited in terms of what can be achieved, evaluated and transferred to 'traditional' schooling.

Nevertheless the innovative teaching, projects, curricula and learning ethos characteristic of these settings have important implications and insights relevant to the schooling system as a whole. The alternatives are readily categorised as residual responses to the deficiencies of the 'mainstream' when in fact they should be seen as an integral part of a

diverse educational landscape, with insights, intelligence and knowledge that a wide spectrum of young people and teachers find attractive.

Access to non-traditional schooling frequently relies on perverse signals. Teachers and others say young people have to exhibit problematic behaviour in order to gain entry to an appropriate learning environment customised to needs that produced the behaviour in the first place.

Even more precarious is the position of young people who actually leave school during the compulsory years. Frequently alternative settings have either not been available to them or they have rejected these and other initiatives as well. The task of re-engagement is fraught and often beyond the capacities of mainstream schools to adequately address.

### **The scale**

There is a lack of clear, accurate data to assess the scale of the issue. There is virtually no publicly available data from the states, and it is not mentioned in the annual National Report on Schooling published by MCEETYA. Although there was a House of Representatives inquiry into truancy and school exclusion in 1996, there seems to be a lack of high level public concern about the broader issue of school exclusion.<sup>1</sup>

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The ABS reports that in 2000 more than 16,000 school leavers exited with Year 9 or a lesser qualification. More than half (51 per cent) were in 'at risk' activities in May 2001; 37 per cent had gone on to a form of further education, predominantly lower level certificate courses. In the same year, a further 39,000 exited having completed year 10 and with 45 per cent in 'at risk' activities in May 2001.<sup>2</sup>

John Ainley's paper for the Eldridge Youth Pathways Taskforce on non-attendance at school is perhaps the best assessment to hand, but even then, it relies heavily on deduction and he did not have access to data from all the states.<sup>3</sup> Ainley defines non-attendance as including truancy, absenteeism, school refusal, school withdrawal, under age school leaving and disciplinary forms of exclusion such as suspension and expulsion. Based on the available state data the discrepancy between school enrolments and census data for young people aged 6 years to 14 years in 1998 is estimated at 23,100. An estimated 15,500 young people between the ages of 12 and 14 years (or 2 per cent of the 12 -14 years cohort) were absent. This increased from 9,000 or 1.2 per cent in 1988.

Another source is a 1997 NYARS study that estimated there were up to 20,000 under age early leavers in the mid-1990s, and that there were a further 4 to 10 per cent (or up to

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<sup>1</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Truancy and Exclusion from School*, AGPS, 1996

<sup>2</sup> ABS, *Education and Work Australia*, May 2001, Cat No 6277.0, unpublished data, and *How Young People are Faring 2002*, DSF, Sydney, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> J Ainley and M Lonsdale, 'Non-attendance at school', Report to DETYA, April 2000, published in *Footprints to the Future, Report of the Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Taskforce*, Vol 2 Appendices, pp39-52.

50,000) early leavers requiring support and special assistance to remain at school.<sup>4</sup> The NYARS study emphasised the importance of locational factors, with 15 per cent of all secondary schools considered 'high risk' schools where 5 to 10 per cent of students were actual school leavers and where up to 30 per cent of the school population could be considered potential early school leavers.

Neither Ainley nor the NYARS study report on the post-school pathways of under age leavers, or the extent of their re-engagement.

American literature, theorising (and practice?) on this issue emphasises the process of dropping out as a cumulative one, often seen in extended absences during the compulsory years, and characterised by increasingly negative messages from the school in relation to academic performance and discipline problems. Multiple points of attachment to school need to be developed (not just academic achievement but sport, volunteering, work, and so on) and the challenge really is how schools can create constructive and stimulating environments to reduce 'dropping out'.

The reasons why young people leave school early vary widely but commonly there is not one single factor – usually a number of issues come into play.<sup>5</sup> ACEE and YRC recently interviewed 1400 young people still at school or who had recently left and were in 'marginal activity' at 60 sites across Australia as part of an evaluation of the Full Service Schools program.<sup>6</sup>

The most important factors connecting young people to school were relationships - friendship with other students and relationships with teachers that involved mutual respect and responsibility. The major concern was their relationship with teachers and the way in which teachers treated them. Particular concerns included teachers 'not listening', students feeling that 'the teachers did not want to be there', that teachers were 'arrogant', 'too busy', 'not maintaining confidential comments' and 'in bad moods'. The 'push factors' of negative experiences of school rather than the 'pull factors' of other options were more important as to why young people leave. The influence of low achievement, especially in core areas such as literacy and numeracy, is crucial.

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<sup>4</sup> M Brooks, C Milne, K Paterson, K Johansson and K Hart, *Under Age School Leaving. A report examining approaches to assisting young people at risk of leaving school before the school leaving age*, National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, 1997

<sup>5</sup> M Batten & J Russell, 'Students at Risk: A Review of Australian Literature 1980-94', ACER, Melbourne, 1995; see also J. Smyth et al, *Listen to Me I'm Leaving. Early School Leaving in South Australia*, Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching, South Australian Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2000; S. Lamb, P. Dwyer, J. Wyn, *Non-completion of School in Australia: The Changing Patterns of Participation and Outcomes*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 16, ACER, Melbourne, 2000; S. Lamb & P. McKenzie, *Patterns of Success and Failure in the Transition from School to Work in Australia*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 18, ACER, Melbourne, 2001

<sup>6</sup> Australian Centre for Equity through Education & Australian Youth Research Centre, *Building Relationships. Making Education Work*, DETYA, Canberra, 2001, see especially pp 6-13.

A recent study by Richard Teese found 62 per cent of Queensland boys performing poorly at school chose the image of prison to describe their experience of school.<sup>7</sup>

He argues "the jobs (early leavers) are able to get - apprentice mechanic, butcher, tiler, counter staff, gardener, factory hand, piece worker, shelf stacker, window cleaner - are governed by the model of learning by experience, through immersion in practice, with theory acquired on the job or scarcely required at all. This model does not demand that they project themselves through mastery of words and symbols, books and assignments, that they make a sustained investment in the internal world of ideas which these objects represent. So it is often with relief and pleasure that they leave school. They have the feeling that things now depend on their own efforts, on processes that they can master, where before, at school, they could not manage the tasks nor see the point of the tasks they could manage and were thus wholly dependent on the goodwill of others."<sup>8</sup>

Under age leavers come primarily from low socio-economic backgrounds, and indigenous young people are vastly over-represented. Other important traits and circumstances are low academic self-concept, self-esteem and social competence, low family cohesion and parental acceptance. It is also suggested clusters of disadvantaged students 'nested' in particular schools have negative impacts, and approaches that promote greater diversity in school populations and teaching are important.

### **The responses**

The NYARS report identified a sample of 45 local initiatives across Australia, managed to survey 34 of them and conducted in depth case study interviews with 21 of them.

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There were several main types of initiatives:

- Community based partial withdrawal from mainstream school for a period of time (students remain enrolled in school but are transferred temporarily or on a part-time basis to a 'community setting')
- School based partial withdrawal (to an annexe or a 'time-out' program)
- Community school separate from the traditional school catering to special needs or behaviours, usually with a strong focus on pastoral care
- Outreach services where specialist services are sourced in the community and brought into the school (eg case management of drug, bullying issues etc)
- Whole school approaches where a different philosophy applies (eg. students having the same teachers through years 7 to 10, school wide welfare support and structured primary to secondary transition programs)
- Event based activities such as camps and excursions to help 'turn young people around'.

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7 R Teese and J Polesol, *Undemocratic Schooling. Equity and Quality in Mass Secondary Education in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003, p 138

8 *Ibid.*, p 150

## **Importance of teaching**

Teachers constitute *the* critical factor in the achievement of learning outcomes for students. Teachers make the difference with regard to who is successful at school.<sup>9</sup> National and international research has found that a substantial proportion of the variation in student performance can be attributed to differences between classrooms. To quote Peter Cuttance:

*... The research evidence indicates that 8-19 per cent of the variation in student learning outcomes lies between schools, with a further amount of up to 55 per cent of the variation in individual learning outcomes between classrooms within schools. Up to 60 per cent of the variation in performance of students lies either between schools or between classrooms. The remaining 40 per cent is due to either the characteristics of individual students that influence learning outcomes (socio-economic background, ethnic and language background, family support for education, gender etc) or to random influences in school systems ...*<sup>10</sup>

From our study (with the ACE) of innovative teachers we can say they are passionate about learning and its application to the lives and futures of their students and communities.<sup>11</sup> While highly-skilled in change management and human relations, their in-depth understanding of adolescence and youth culture matches the subject area(s) in which they have expertise. They abide by a personal code of ethics which includes a commitment not only to young people, but also to all those with whom they work.<sup>12</sup> The future will depend on the relationships built with students, parents, communities and teachers.

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### **Strengths of Innovative Teachers**

#### **Attributes**

Altruism, confidence, creativity, intuition, passion, perception, modesty

#### **Skills**

Change management, human relations, applied learning, curriculum integration, outcome-based approaches, standards setting, teaching techniques

#### **Knowledge**

Adolescence, youth culture, subject matter, pedagogy, innovation, change, information technology

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<sup>9</sup> See J Cumming, *Teachers in a Changing Society*, Australian College of Education, National Education and Employment Forum, 16-17 August 2001, Brisbane

<sup>10</sup> P Cuttance, *The impact of teaching on student learning*, Australian College of Educators, Canberra, p.36, quoted in Cumming, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> J Cumming and C Owen, *Reforming Schools through Innovative Teaching*, ACE, ECEF, DSF, 2001

<sup>12</sup> J Cumming, 2001, *op.cit.*

**Values**

Youth, learning, improvement, philosophy, sharing, modelling, accountability

**Strategies**

Challenge assumptions, conduct research, formulate options, form alliances, establish networks, marshal resources, build communities, provide training, identify advocates, transfer ownership, engage stakeholders, value-add, utilise the media, celebrate success, champion innovation, engage parents, create spaces, promote evaluation

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A teaching paradigm that allows for positive and democratic teacher/student, student/student relations is crucial to the success of the construction of a strategy for change. Perhaps there are five essential 'principles' of program design<sup>13</sup> for working with at risk youth:

- connect to student's culture or context
- operate within a climate of adult learning - participants want to be acknowledged as the young adults they see themselves as
- be flexible to accommodate individual needs
- have enthusiastic, flexible program staff that relate well to students. Resources must be provided to sustain this committed staff as too often there are too few staff involved and they burn out; and
- connect to broader community agency networks.

These are not principles we can simply contract out, they have to be part of a genuinely inclusive school culture and spirit. Multiple points of attachment to school need to be developed - not just academic achievement but sport, volunteering, work, and so on.

**Developing alternatives**

Randall Clinch works with students who have been labeled variously as serious 'behaviour problems', 'refusers' or 'clinically depressed'. Without formal teaching qualifications, but with a wealth of hands-on experience, he has developed an interactive form of dialogue that enables these students to come to terms with where they are and where they would like to be. He says, "... *The main skill I am endeavouring to develop in young people is the capacity to recognise the value of their own thinking and ideas. Clarity of thought leads to peace and inner strength. What they do with that skill is up to them, but they are unlikely to find any sense of future without it ...*"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> P St Ledger, and K Ward, *Responding to the Youth Allowance: Is VET the Answer?* presented at the 6th Annual, International Conference on Post Compulsory Education and Training, Griffith University, Brisbane, 1998, p96; see also H Stokes, *Out of Education* Department of Education, Employment and Training, Victoria, 2000; H Stokes and D Tyler, 'Engaging Early School Leavers in Alternative Educational Settings', paper to The Learning Conference, Institute of Education, University of London, 15-18 July, 2003

<sup>14</sup> Cumming and Owen, *op. cit.*, p52, quoted in Cumming, 2001

The temptation may be to relegate Randall to the teaching unit where inner strength is truly required. Too often though these learning alternatives are chronically under recognised, under funded, precariously placed in the structure of education administration and generally considered marginal or outcast to mainstream schooling.

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The student focus of these initiatives vary. Zyngier and Gale<sup>15</sup> point to six different possibilities, some of them more defensive than others:

- Development of stronger curriculum skills
- Improved student well-being to encourage continued study at school
- Behaviour modification to continue school participation
- Community involvement and volunteering to better motivate students to study
- Development of life skills as preparation to leave school
- Employment preparation in anticipation of leaving school.

In the region they studied the vast majority of programs had a non-curriculum focus (87 per cent). More often than not, the focus is on managing student behaviour rather than on revitalising curriculum and pedagogy.

The NYARS report suggests more than 30 best practice principles for initiatives based on what was existing and from the literature. The fundamental question in addressing under age school leaving, it said, "is the extent to which mainstream schools are capable of providing support and special assistance by adopting best processes as part of normal school processes, or whether special initiatives are needed".<sup>16</sup> It concluded that where schools have a small minority of potential under age leavers (2 to 3 per cent of the school population), they can cope and devise programs to assist this group. However where potential under age leavers are a larger group, mainstream schools have much less capacity to cope.

Beyond local initiatives, state authorities have initiated programs like the New Basics in Queensland, attempting to cluster literacy and numeracy, geography and other areas around project-based and experiential learning rather than more passive pedagogies and learning strategies.

In Victoria the Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) actively encourages alternative learning settings through partnerships between a diverse range of educators, practitioners, community agencies and labour market organisations. But it is restricted to the post-compulsory senior secondary years.

Most states have initiated Middle Years programs in years 8, 9 and 10 within mainstream schools to boost teacher numbers and develop more innovative curricula, but practitioners report it remains a challenge to overturn entrenched cultures and expectations.

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<sup>15</sup> D Zyngier and T Gale, 'Non systemic and non-traditional educational programs in Frankston/Mornington Peninsula schools', mimeo., Interim report to the Frankston/Mornington Peninsula LLEN.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, pix

Active programs of re-engagement for 12 to 14 year olds outside formal schooling include Links to Learning in NSW, TAFE vouchers in Victoria, and efforts by some ACE providers.

### **One point of comparison**

One interesting and potentially instructive point of comparison is the Danish Production School system. It is but one of a number of potential exemplars from international experience that might be able to assist Australian educators and local communities to respond to the needs of under age school leavers.

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Alternative learning settings are an established, integral part of the Danish education system. Currently there are more than 100 'Production Schools' (PS) catering at any one time for about 5,700 young people and an annual throughput of about 11-12,000 participants or 2 per cent of the youth population. The target is young people who have difficulties making the transition from junior secondary to middle and senior levels of schooling, and exist alongside primary schools (to year 10), senior secondary schools, technical schools resembling Australian TAFE colleges, and folkschools resembling Australian ACE providers. They operate under a discrete Act of Parliament, which provides them with relative independence and autonomy and frees them from the bind of having to award qualifications.

The goals are to develop a renewed appetite for learning; to impart tangible skills including improved literacy and numeracy through the practice, enjoyment and discipline of work; and for participants to take responsibility for their own learning and the conditions under which their learning takes place. In this sense the schools seek to create a coherent youth environment built around a binding, social, working community shaped by young people.

The schools are typically centered around permanent workshops where instructors and participants work together on practical ideas, designs and projects that result in real goods and services. These can be in traditional craft areas such as metals, woodwork, printing, and textiles but also extend to music, information technology, horticulture and others. They operate as a hybrid school-business with a significant portion of their income derived from their produce sold into the market.

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Other features of Production Schools include:

- participants flow continuously through the school, there isn't one static cohort
- each participant's personal and social situation is assessed and addressed along with their educational development
- operation across the full year, 52 weeks, rather than school terms or semesters
- a diverse workforce of trained teachers, instructors, tradespeople and others drawn from the professions and business

- length of stay at the schools varies from several weeks to eighteen months or more, with the best outcomes accruing to those participants with more than three months experience in the PS

In one leading school 47 per cent of the intake were drop-outs from the post-compulsory equivalent of TAFE, 49 per cent came directly from school or the labour market. Most students had completed their compulsory schooling to year 10 or beyond but 23 per cent had not and 10 per cent had begun post-compulsory but dropped out. Most students ranged in age from 16 to 22 years, but nearly 10 per cent were under 16 years. Increasingly these schools are finding that young people below 16 are in need of their services and are having to adjust their programs accordingly.

Recent longitudinal data suggests positive destination outcomes for the majority of students with about 15-20 per cent moving on to unemployment. Four years after the Production School experience 35 per cent of participants were in employment; 16 per cent were unemployed; and the bulk of participants had moved onto further education or training.

The PS system is a useful comparison because it thrives amidst other settings; it is an essential ingredient in the Danish goal of educational inclusion, rather than a troublesome adjunct. The way these schools have become embedded in the system, and the techniques, pedagogies and professional development they use could be of value to Australian educators, policy-makers, and school communities. No doubt there are other examples as well in overseas practice that can help improve Australian approaches.

## **NZ Alternatives**

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Closer to home the New Zealand Government has recognised the importance of catering for disenfranchised young people in schooling. Since 1997 it has provided funding for alternative education programmes for young people who become alienated from school. In 1998, the Education Ministry established contracts with schools for places for 400 students in alternative education programmes. In 1999 this increased to 1,000 students and rose to 1,820 students (aged 13 to 15 years) in 2002.

The aim of the policy is for these students to re-enter the education system in a mainstream school. Once eligible (i.e., aged 15 years and exempted, or 16 years), other positive outcomes would include entering a Youth Training Programme or a polytechnic course or finding a job and joining the workforce. The NZ Education Act 1989 says that young people must attend a registered school from their sixth to their sixteenth birthday. The Ministry provides the alternative education funding to secondary schools who contract with a community provider to deliver the programme. Some schools provide their own alternative education programme on site. The school enrolls the students, and maintains oversight to ensure that a quality programme is delivered. Often community providers are better able to meet the needs of the young people in alternative education, because the partner is part of the young person's ethnic or cultural community, or is able

to use a non-school approach. There is a strong and growing Maori community involvement in policy and the provision of alternatives.

A student is defined as being alienated when neither the young person nor the school(s) is(are) willing to have that young person attending a regular school setting, and one or more of the following apply. The young person has:

- been out of school for two terms or more;
- multiple exclusions (more than one school in urban; 1 + other factors in rural);
- a history of dropping out of mainstream schooling after being reintegrated; and/or
- dropped out of The Correspondence School after enrolment as an at risk
- student.

Only young people aged between 13 and 15 years old who are unable to be re-integrated into regular schools come under the Alternative Education Policy definition of 'alienated'. Younger students are returned to regular schools. The Non Enrolment Truancy Service (NETS) confirms each student's alienated status (i.e. acts as a 'referee' or gatekeeper). The policy definition of alienation was amended in 2002 and a student may be verified for access to Alternative Education through a decision made by a case management team. The team would include the school, at least one other agency that the student had been involved with plus a Non Enrolment Truancy Service adviser, and the Alternative Education co-ordinator.

Students must be aged between 13 and 15 years (inclusive) and may be considered for Alternative Education by the group when:

- they have been absent for at least half of the last 20 weeks (for reasons other than illness) and the absence has meant that they are unable to maintain a mainstream programme; or
- they have been suspended or excluded and risk further suspensions or exclusions. The school must be able to document genuine interventions that have been previously trialled and failed.
- the school must also have carried out a diagnostic assessment that defines gaps in behaviour or learning and desired outcomes for the student that will be addressed by an individual learning plan.

### **Brooks High School**

A variation on this might be Brooks High School in Launceston.<sup>17</sup> Brooks has a student population of 575, with Year 7-10 and some Year 11 & 12 students both part and full-time for an agricultural program. They have part-time and individual timetables to be flexible to students' needs and operate on a middle school philosophy of individual attention and small groups involving lots of team work. It is really a series of schools within a school all operating under one umbrella. I'll tell you about two of them.

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<sup>17</sup> See Report on Alternative Education in Australia, unpubl. mimeo., May 2003, DSF

Birribi is located 10 minutes walk from the school in an old fire station. The students take part in a whole range of activities including gifted & talented programs, work-skills, building cars, rebuilding motorbikes, video production, grief counselling, a Kids help line, TAFE comes and teaches sculpture and other art & craft, BMX projects and other small group activities. The students go for one 1 1/2 hr period either per day, or per week. This will be from 4 weeks up to the full year depending on what they are involved in. In any given year about a third of the school population will have done an activity at Birribi. About 90 go there each week. The coordinator, Chris, is a teacher, with a history in youth work and is very innovative in his ideas for the centre. (Himself and two part-time teachers run the centre). Current activities include restoring a 1959 Ford, and rebuilding a 1963 Morris and papering the sides with magazine images! They sell the cars and restored bikes.

The other off-campus facility is 'Spanners' which is located at TAFE. This is an automotive course for Year 9 & 10. The facility can presently only cater for groups of 4 or 5 and the students go for a 10 week block. They go to the Spanners program for 2 sessions per day (total of 3 hours), 5 days per week so it is quite an intensive program. The students quickly work out if they are interested or not, and will move to something else if not, leaving room for someone else. It was stressed that this is not a behaviour management course but was inspired by the students' interest in mechanics.

Brooks was the originator of the NO DOLE program available to Year 8 and up.<sup>18</sup> The No Dole Program is about assisting young people, usually Year 10s, to gain knowledge and skills related to employment and the workplace so they can make excellent decisions about their futures.

There are three core components:

- At a formal public ceremony, all of the Year 10 students sign a No Dole Charter which commits them to positive pathways in following years
- Students are given individual, school based support to motivate and assist them to set informed, realistic career goals
- Students interact with employers by such means as mentoring, careers workshops, work placements, classes being adopted by businesses etc.

In the first year of No Dole (1998), the number going onto Centrelink payments was halved, and by the third year not one of the school's exiting students went on the dole. That 100% success rate has been maintained every year since.

### **Croc Skills *Try-A-Trade***

The first Croc Skills event was initiated by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum and ran alongside the Croc Festival in Moree in 2001. The Croc Festival is an annual event held in a handful of regional centres around the country each year. The festivals join young indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in a celebration of youth culture which takes

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<sup>18</sup> See [www.beaconfoundation.net](http://www.beaconfoundation.net)

place over three days and involves performing arts, sports, careers markets, health expos, goal setting workshops, and a Croc Skills 'Try-A-Trade' event.

The Croc Skills project aims to give the students a hands-on introduction to a variety of jobs and in particular make a stronger connection for the students between school and the world of work. Taking the traditional careers market one step further, at a Croc Skills event, students get to actually try each of the jobs on offer, to get a first hand taste of what each job involves and learn some real skills associated with each occupation.

Croc Skills is aimed at students in years 7, 8 and 9 and simply seeks to open the students' eyes a little to what jobs there are out there by giving them some real contact with people working in those areas.

Skilled tradespeople from the local community come together in the one location to work with the students in small groups of 2 or 3 and introduce them to their profession. These "skill coaches" teach the students a skill that is hands-on and that illustrates what their job is like. For example, in the plumbing area, students work with a local apprentice plumber on an old sink to change a washer and clear a trap. The apprentice also talks to the students about pathways they can take to enter the plumbing trade, and in particular reinforces the need to stay at school to ensure they have the necessary skills to take up the education and training. An emphasis is placed on highlighting the need for good literacy and numeracy skills to be able to do each of the jobs.

In the past Croc Skills has included the traditional building trades such as carpentry, electrical, plumbing, tiling, plastering – but in 2003, it was extended to include other trades, and importantly, jobs that are relevant to the particular region. In Thursday Island there was an outboard motor mechanics category and a refrigeration category. In Tennant Creek students learnt film editing under the direction of the film section at the local language centre. In Swan Hill the Department of Primary Industries worked with the students on salinity testing. Students in Moree had a go at learning how to perm hair with an apprentice hairdresser, and report and look after seedlings in the horticulture category.

Following the activity, students are sent a booklet that includes more information about each of the jobs and contact details for the local TAFE colleges and other training organisations. Profiles of local apprentices are also included with the story of how they entered their industry.

Measuring the outcomes of this kind of event is quite difficult as it's a fairly short event, with students only spending an hour or two in the activity, moreover, it's only one of (hopefully) a number of activities students participate in to help them move along the pathway toward employment. However the feedback we gathered from the students themselves, and from the skill coaches has been really good. Many skill coaches have nominated themselves to be available to assist careers advisers and vocational education teachers in the schools. The skill coaches are a fantastic resource for the schools and we are looking at ways of extending their involvement to develop into more of a mentoring role with individual students.

Croc Skills is now an integral part of the Croc Festival, but obviously it is a model that can be replicated in any community or any school. The Worldskills organisation is currently organising Try-A-Trade events to run alongside their regional skill competitions in a number of areas. Closer to home, the Alexandria Park Community School in Redfern is considering running a Croc Skills event later this year. They are looking at ways to use the event as a tool to encourage the take up of traineeships in the school.

While Croc Skills is quite a simple project, it gives the students an engaging, hands-on taste of work in various professions and perhaps, just as importantly, engages the community in the development of their young people on the path from school to work.

### **Specialisation**

A question raised by Brooks is whether the comprehensive one school model is still sustainable. Many schools in Melbourne's middle suburbs are being squeezed between fraying infrastructure, an ageing community profile and set of demographics, an ageing teacher workforce, and a middle class drift to private schools. There are long term issues of morale and capacity. Pat Thomson talks about the challenge of rustbelt kids in the rustbelt suburbs.<sup>19</sup>

If the sector is to offer an effective range of high quality choices it is likely to be through more effective combinations of school, TAFE and ACE, where schools work co-operatively to improve their specialisations and maximise their strengths. This will involve a greater movement of students between schools to take advantage of these new opportunities in quality learning. This will involve some compromises and a significantly different way of working: it will mean surrendering some autonomy to achieve better outcomes; it will probably mean that over time students may develop a stronger affiliation with their learning specialisation than with local institutions.

The Schools Specialist Trust is funded in the UK to do just this, by building the strengths of schools in areas such as the arts, engineering, enterprise, languages, sport, and sciences.<sup>20</sup>

One way to achieve integrated specialisation is through the development of senior colleges. Specialisation is easier where senior colleges exist, such as Tasmania, where the eight senior colleges on the island are producing powerful outcomes. The senior colleges have a critical mass of students, funding and teachers that enables them to provide a diversity of programs that have better chances of being customised to the needs of individual students.<sup>21</sup>

Another way to specialise is within a cluster, as partners in a joint educational enterprise. Again Tasmania provides an interesting example. The Real Learning - Real

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<sup>19</sup> P Thomson, *Schooling the Rustbelt Kids. Making the difference in changing times*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2002

<sup>20</sup> See [www.specialistschoolstrust.org.uk](http://www.specialistschoolstrust.org.uk)

<sup>21</sup> P Kellock, Review of the uses of structured workplace learning, October 2002, DSF

Futures program brings together all 10 secondary schools in the Derwent Valley district to provide project based learning to their students. The projects are based at school or out in the community, some are accredited, some aren't. They include boat building, river keepers, emergency services training, school farm programs, aquaculture, marine adventure courses, and many more. For example one school had spare capacity in their workshop and put a tender out to artisans - they use the workshop commercially, and in repayment have the students learning alongside them.

Real Learning - Real Futures was developed by the schools to jointly address issues of participation, attendance and retention in the Derwent District. They pool resources to provide a range of innovative authentic learning programs for students and encourage collective responsibility from schools and the broader community for 'their children'.

Each school has targeted a group of 'at-risk' students using participation/engagement indicators (attendance, literacy, behaviour etc). These students are those identified at risk of not continuing with their education beyond grade 10. They say, "all students will benefit from this program but it will provide a context where we make much better provision for our students 'at risk' without isolating them from the mainstream." Participating students are aged between 15 and 19 years of age.

### **Our goal**

Modern society has made a social and legally binding contract with all its young people which says they must attend institutions of learning to a specific age and they are denied the right to enter the labour market (full-time, and without attending school) below a certain age. In return, society promises to equip them with the minimum level of education required to become independent learners and earners.

What rights (if any) have young people got under such a contract? Must they accept whatever form of provision is on offer or do they have right to choice? If so, under what circumstances?

According to the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, the NSW Education Act, for example, does not stipulate the rights of children and parents or set standards against which education services can be measured - rather it establishes bodies, provides for their constitutions and allocates them defined power within which they have authority to act. The Act describes an obligation of the state to provide an education of the highest quality, but doesn't specify how that is to be measured.

The South Australian Education Act also says that the Act is to 'make proper provision for primary and secondary education in this State.' However, it does not detail what 'proper provision' means.

Of all the states perhaps Queensland comes closest to defining the obligations of the state as to what must be provided, and identifying what students are entitled to receive. Queensland has introduced a right to attend specific educational facilities through an 'allocation' system, whereby individuals are allocated a certain number of 'allocations' of

education. A child that enters school at year one has 15 'allocations'<sup>22</sup>. Decisions in relation to the use and loss of allocations are reviewable by the Courts<sup>23</sup>.

PIAC says the right to education is not present in State legislation by the creation of the right *in general terms*. What this means is that the various State education acts have not expressed a right to education and made it actionable. In particular, the right to a standard of education is not expressly guaranteed and actionable.

If the system now accepts post compulsory learning pathways, why can't there be (other than 'residual') recognition for pre compulsory learning pathways which are even more important (and probably cost effective) in producing long term benefits to both parties to the contract. If we can now have 'special' senior schools for gifted young people in the arts and in sports why not open access to such alternative learning environments to younger people who are in fact coping with adult responsibilities in their early teens?

Our goal is to provide a much clearer and more coherent rationale for choice, high standards and appropriate delivery and shared resourcing across the silos of educational, health, family services and community development to name a few. In short we are seeking to reposition 'alternative education' as a real choice in a diverse educational landscape rather than as a last chance in a system of compulsion.

**[KEY QUESTIONS SLIDE]**

**[NEXT STEPS SLIDE]**

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<sup>22</sup> ss.121(2), *Education (General Provisions) Act* QLD

<sup>23</sup> see Part 10, *Education (General Provisions) Act* QLD