

# RURAL EDUCATION IN TASMANIA

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The general perception of many mainlanders is that rural education in Tasmania does not exist because of the small size of the state. However, this perception ignores important geographical factors such as topography and the distribution of population. The result is that Tasmania does in fact have a significant rural education sector, covering distinct areas such as the West Coast, Bass Strait Islands, Midlands, the Channel and North East and East coasts - in fact most areas outside the 'islands of urbanisation'.

Although the overall Australian population is increasing, the rate is very different State by State. If current trends continue, the population in Queensland will increase by over 80% by the year 2041, while in Tasmania it will increase by only 15% in the same period. Tasmania's present growth rate is low (at 0.21%) compared to 1.06% for Australia as a whole. Tasmania's proportion of the Australian population will therefore drop from 2.7% in 1995 to 2.0% by 2041.

At present the school population in Tasmania is relatively stable. Up to the year 2000 the overall numbers will be approximately the same, although there will be a decrease in secondary students (20,570 in 1996 to 18,150 in 2000) and an increase in both senior secondary (8980 in 1996 to 10,350 in 2000) and primary students (35,710 in 1996 to 36,760 in 2000). Much of this discrepancy was caused by the policy change resulting in every student having a Preparatory year from 1993. This effectively meant that a reduced cohort of students progressed to Year 1 in 1993, while an increased cohort remained in Preparatory. The difference was not as great as had been predicted because the policy was not rigidly enforced, with some parents choosing to send their children straight to Year 1 in that first year.

Commonwealth grants to the States as a share of Commonwealth taxes have fallen from 35.7% in 1982/83 to 27.7% in 1995/96 and when compared with GDP growth, grants to the States have declined 21% since 1982/83 (equivalent to a reduction of \$8.9 billion in 1995/96 terms).

Education in Tasmania is characterised by a small but high quality system comprising the following student population structure:

73,000 students, with each cohort being less than 6,000 in size.

150 Primary	K-6
26 District High	K-10
34 High	7-10
8 Colleges	11-12
11 Special Schools	

The major influencing factors affecting this structure are:

- A population dispersal greater than any other area in Australia;

\*\* A keynote address was presented by Mr Harrington, covering rural education from a Tasmanian perspective. The following notes summarise the main points of his presentation and are supplied by Mr Peter d'Plesse, Conference Organiser.

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- A low SES index in rural areas;
- Significant cultural diversity;
- A retention rate over Grades 7-12 of 59%, compared to the national average of 74%;
- Significant youth unemployment, particularly in Tasmanian rural areas.

In Tasmania, certain geographic features and the climatic pattern add to the isolation of particular communities. Psychological elements such as resistance to travel and strong community parochialism are also evident.

As well as its isolation as an island, it is often not understood that Tasmania has the most rurally dispersed population of any Australian state. This dispersal has tended to foster attitudes of separateness so that regional loyalties remain very powerful within Tasmania's rural communities (d'Plesse 1990).

The population of many isolated rural communities includes many who are long term residents as well as a transient group which includes teachers and other professionals. The differences in values, expectations and backgrounds between these two groups may lead to a lack of trust and of appropriate channels of communication between them.

Recently an increasing number of families in poor socio-economic circumstance have moved to rural areas because of relatively inexpensive housing and lower cost of living.

Rural Tasmania has many positive features, as its products and characteristics are often viewed as the jewels in the Australian crown - namely, our foods, wine, minerals and wilderness areas.

However, the rural downturn which has affected wool production and led to uncertainty in the mining industry has had a significant effect. This effect is compounded by two major problems, namely:

- A general population decline
- A high level of parochialism.

The definition of rural areas used by the Tasmanian Education Department is basically one based on self identification. That is, if a community sees themselves as rural, then they are treated as such.

This accords with the reality that most areas of Tasmania outside the commuter belts surrounding the islands of urbanisation fit any criteria for being rural.

Various indices of rurality are used in the allocation of resources to Tasmanian schools. These are distance, size of centre and degree of isolation and using these indices the following numbers of schools can be regarded as rural:

47 out of 150	Primary
21 out of 26	District High Schools
6 out of 34	High Schools
0	Special Schools
0	Colleges, but 6 District High Schools have Grade 11 and 12 classes.

Generally rural school in Tasmania are small:

Primary	32 < 100 students
	18 < 50 students

Senior secondary 3 District Highs cater for < 12 students  
Only 1750 in total in this sector

The smallest school has only 7 students.

Access to school can be difficult for some rural students. Schools are not close and public transport is not always available. In particular, rural students have difficulty accessing specialist education facilities. Attendance at senior secondary colleges which are located only in major centres is also difficult. Access may be further restricted by financial and emotional costs to families if students have to move away from home to attend school.

A Tasmanian study (Abbot-Chapman and Patterson Report 1992) demonstrated that choice of school and equity of access is dependent on what provision the schools offers rather than mere presence of a school. This study found that 22.9% of those who live in areas without a local school opt to attend not the nearest school, but a school which is further away.

Issues which must be addressed in the context of rural education in Tasmania include the following:

#### Small Schools:

- Their likely continued decline through population drift;
- Argument for and against small schools in terms of their cost versus the richness of the education program and cycle of decline in rural communities brought about by school closure.

#### Transport:

- Cost of provision;
- Quality of service - 4th on list of expenditure;
- Service parameters;
- Alternative provision such as Tasmanian School of Distance Education.

#### Staffing:

- Age and experience of teachers;
- Provision of relief;
- Provision of professional development;
- Operation of the transfer policy.

#### Retention:

- Link to unemployed;
- Effect of parochialism.

#### Specialist Services:

- Provision of Special Education;
- Therapy;
- Psychiatric;
- Special Secondary teachers.

Retention is a major issue as rural retention rates are considerably lower than in urban areas and in comparison to the mainland. Rural youth have tended to leave school early to take up

employment in the local community or help run a family property or business. For country students it was previously possible to have a successful adult life with steady income without completing secondary school. Labour market conditions have changed markedly, leading to high unemployment rates in rural areas.

A reluctance to leave home to further their education, inadequate accommodation and support, and the financial burden of living away from home are factors that contribute to rural students having low retention rates.

Comparative issues from 1970:

- Student accommodation;
- Transport;
- Specialist services;
- Consolidation;
- Incentives for teachers;
- Facilities.

Issues for the future which will need to be addressed include:

- Enrolment;
- Technology;
- Resourcing.

In conclusion it can be said that rural education certainly exists in Tasmania. There are significant issues which need to be addressed but the past track record is a good one. Rural education in Tasmania is alive and well and we can be optimistic for the future.

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