

**ROTARY CLUB OF HOBART
ADDRESS BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
RESTAURANT TASMAN HOTEL GRAND CHANCELLOR
HOBART 31 JANUARY 2019**

Thank you, Rotary Club of Hobart, for inviting me to speak to you today.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land—the Mouheneener people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

In my role as Governor, I have taken a particular interest in education. This is not simply because my background is in higher education. It is also because I have been given the opportunity to do something about it by being asked to chair the Advisory Committee of the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment; to be an Education Ambassador and to be patron of ‘Chatter Matters’, an organisation that seeks to improve communication and literacy of prisoners.

The Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment.

The centre was established in 2015 and named in honour of the late Governor Peter Underwood, who had the very firm view that, “Education perhaps more than anything is the passport to a better life.” The centre is a partnership between the University of Tasmania, the Tasmanian Government and the Office of the Governor and its aim is to improve learning experiences and outcomes for children and young people through iconic projects; collaborations and research; and knowledge dissemination. As Chair of the Advisory Committee I have been given the opportunity to help progress Peter Underwood’s vision of the potential of education to transform lives.

Education is of particular importance in Tasmania because it is one way in which we can help address the fact that on many measures Tasmania is the poorest Australian state:

- We have one of the highest unemployment rates (5.8% for November 2018).¹

- Average gross income per household data released in August 2018 shows Tasmania's is the lowest of all the states and territories and 13% below the average for all states and territories;²
- 31% of Tasmania's population is in the most disadvantaged socio-economic status quintile (one fifth) of Australia's population, a higher proportion than for any other state;¹
- Economist Saul Eslake explains that we are less well off than the rest of Australia because of the employment participation gap (a smaller proportion with a job); the hours worked gap; and the Labour productivity gap (we produce less for each hour worked than on average in Australia).

Some of the reasons for the relative poverty of Tasmania we cannot do much about, such as the higher proportion of the population that is over 65, and the fact that high level labour productivity industries such as mining and finance are under-represented in Tasmania.

But there is something we can do to increase levels of employment, hours worked and productivity, because there are unambiguous linkages between these factors and education level. The higher the level of education a person has the more likely they are to be employed, and the employed are more likely to be full-time if they have a post-secondary qualification. And there is clear evidence of a correlation between learning and productivity.

So education is a driver of economic prosperity for individuals and for the economy.

What is the education situation in Tasmania?

- Forty-eight per cent of Tasmanian adults are functionally illiterate. This is four percentage points higher than the national average and there is this same gap in relation to numeracy. This means that 48% of Tasmanians will be unable to complete a job application; understand workplace health and safety instructions; understand a medicine label or the nutritional information on a packet of food; or help children with their homework. This gap between Tasmania and the national average is partly the result of our older than average population but it is also a reflection of the lower level

¹ Saul Eslake, 'Education, Productivity and Economic Performance: Tasmania, then, now and tomorrow' 29th John West Memorial Lecture, 16th March 2017. Updated from Treasury data, released August 2018.

educational participation and attainment by younger Tasmanians than their interstate counterparts.

- A smaller proportion of Tasmania's population has a bachelor's degree or higher than any other State or Territory (a gap of 6%; nationally 31% of Australians have a bachelor degree or above; and more than 40% of 19-year-olds are enrolled in higher education but this is much lower in Tasmania with 21% of 19-year-olds enrolled at the University of Tasmania);
- A much larger proportion of Tasmania's population has no educational qualification beyond Year 10; and
- Year 10-12 direct retention rates at around 72% (for 2017)² are improving but remain at 12% below the national average.
- NAPLAN results are reasonable. Results for 2018 show our best results for Year 3 with more than 90% above the national minimum standard for reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation and numeracy (96% for the latter). Interestingly, at Year 9 Tasmanian schools tend to outperform comparable Australian schools in terms of the ICSEA index.
- A large proportion of Australian school students are consistently disengaged in class and this is particularly so in schools with a higher proportion of lower SES families: as many as 40% of students are unproductive in a given year according to a WA study which focused on low socio-economic schools.³ This of course has implications for those who are not disengaged (their learning is disrupted) and because Tasmania has a higher proportion of lower SES families than other States and territories it disproportionately affects Tasmania.

Cultural challenges

School and education do not finish in Year 10

Lower levels of education have been the norm for too long in Tasmania. High schools finish in Year 10 and College has been seen as optional. Year 10 Leavers' Dinners are a tradition which reinforces this message.

² JR Rockliff, 'Tasmanian education is on the rise' 10 May 2018, http://www.premier.tas.gov.au/releases/tasmanian_education_is_on_the_rise

³ Cited by Peter Goss and Julie Sonneman, *Engaging Students: Creating classrooms that improve learning*, Grattan Institute, 2017, 10.

We need cultural change in Tasmanian households that sees a change in parental expectations of their children's education; we need completion of Year 12 to be the norm along with post Year 12 education or training. We need to strengthen VET pathways and school-based apprenticeships so these are highly valued as well as academic pathways to University.

Good work is being done through the school-based apprenticeships and Trade Training Centres (there are eight of these around the state). They provide opportunities for VET education in Years 11 and 12 thus improving the quality of education for students undertaking a trade-related pathway and they aim to increase the percentage of students with a Year 12 qualification or equivalent.

Engaging parents and children

Engaging parents and children in their learning is recognised as key to improving educational attainment. This means not just school-based learning; but engaging in early learning and learning outside the classroom. Studies of childhood development show the importance of communicating with children. Babies are learning language from the beginning so it is important to talk to them from birth, respond to their facial expressions, and as the Boston Basics suggest 'Talk, Sing and Point'.

The Boston Basics are five simple ways every family can give every child a great start in life. They are: maximise love, manage stress; talk, sing and point; count, group and compare; explore movement through play; and read and discuss stories. It is never too early to begin reading to your child – even babies enjoy it and benefit. The idea of the Boston Basics is to have a mass community education campaign to promote these five parenting principles.

The Underwood Centre is collaborating with a number of other educators: Bill Jarvis, Principal of Claremont College, two teachers from Margate Primary School and Alison Stone, who has produced some helpful books for parents about early learning, to progress running a trial of Boston Basics in Tasmania, perhaps in Glenorchy.

The Children's University

Children's University is an 'iconic project' of the Underwood Centre. It recognises the importance of learning outside the formal classroom setting and the importance of encouraging engagement in learning. Schools in lower SES areas in

Australia have joined the programme which provides educational opportunities for 8-14-year-olds outside the school at a range of some 150 learning destinations including museums, sporting clubs and other organisations – even involving Children’s University students in productions such as Rosehaven. Learning passports are stamped with hours of participation and students with a minimum of 30 hours are eligible to graduate. Graduation ceremonies are held in conjunction with University December graduations, with children wearing gowns and participating in the Town and Gown Parades in Hobart, Launceston and Burnie.

In 2018 we had 343 graduating students from 31 schools across the state. Currently we have 38 schools involved and 2 community-led programs, and the West Coast is to be launched in a couple of months.

Literacy and educational disadvantage

How do we tackle the fact that 48% of Tasmanians are functionally illiterate? We need a range of measures. For adults the Government’s 26Ten programme is exemplary. This programme has now been running for almost 8 years and I have had the opportunity to see their literacy tutors at work with adult learners and to visit a workplace and speak to employees who have benefited from the programme by improving their numeracy skills, literacy and communication. 26Ten has 860 organisations and individual supporters and 1,333 people have volunteered and undertaken training to be a literacy tutor.³ When we travel around the state visiting workplaces and industries, one of the questions we now ask is, ‘Do you have a literacy or numeracy problem with your employees?’. And we explain how 26Ten can help.

How can we help our kids?

I have mentioned Boston Basics and the Children’s University.

Late last year we held a symposium at Government House, called ‘Communicating, the Heart of Literacy’. This was run by Rosalie Martin, 2017 Tasmanian Australian of the Year. Rosie is a speech pathologist who is passionate about literacy. She believes that almost without exception, every child can learn to read. She is not alone in believing that this is the case. At the end of the symposium participants agreed to embrace the goal of not just closing the gap between Tasmania and the rest of Australia in literacy and numeracy but ensuring that every child learns to read.

I have watched Rosie at work in a Grade 3 classroom at Bridgewater. Recall that I said that according to NAPLAN tests, in Tasmania 90% of Grade 3 children in Tasmania score above the national minimum standard for reading, writing, and numeracy. In the Grade 3 class I visited, the Principal told me that only 7 of the class of 28 had reached the minimum standard for reading. The school is attempting to address this with Rosie's help.

Using flash cards, the class teacher, Miss M, took the children through their letters. They had to name the letter, pronounce its phoneme and write it with a finger in the air. She then added phonemes consisting of two letters and then words. Next came abstractions, for example clunk without the c. Rosie then took groups of two and three, those experiencing the most difficulty, asking them to write a word in their book and then count the phonemes in the word with starting with their little finger in their non-writing hand. This was interspersed with card games as rewards to keep them engaged. I watched a little boy, who is said to have an IQ of 70, learn the pronunciation and phonemic signals which indicate whether a '-ck' or '-nk' spelling should be used at the end of a word.

Rosie explained that they would soon divide the class so that those that found the whole class exercises easy could move on.

It seems that the age of 8 is key. John Hattie, of the University of Melbourne, one of our leading education experts, says that if children have not mastered Level 2 Math's and Reading skills by the age of 8 they face considerable difficulty in catching up.

What happens to children with lower IQs and children with dyslexia or other learning differences? They require specialised assistance and considerable time devoted to helping them. Do we have enough resources in our schools to do this? Some parents can provide the additional assistance their child needs by employing a speech pathologist or other specialist or by undergoing training themselves so they can assist at home. For many children this is not available. It is not likely to be available if they have parents who are functionally illiterate and so the cycle of disadvantage continues.

There is no silver bullet to deal with our literacy problem. We need a variety of approaches to tackle it which includes such things as helping parents with their literacy problems so they can help their children; improving children's early learning, from birth to three; reviewing and improving how we helped children to learn to read in schools (the Underwood Centre is currently conducting a review of

literacy in Tasmanian schools for the Department of Education); providing more assistance to those children who are struggling before they became disengaged with their learning. More speech pathologists in schools would help and more support for children with learning differences in our schools.

Many children have no difficulty in learning to read and seem to pick it up so easily. For others it is a mystery of decoding which takes many hours of patient help.

And I have just mentioned one of the issues we face in educating our children. There are many others, such as keeping children engaged in their learning in high school (schools need to be inviting places to be); we need to protect children from being bullied and to respond appropriately when they are; to help children who are traumatised by family violence or abuse, support those who are neglected by their parents because of mental issues or drug addiction so they are in a position to engage with their learning.

There are many challenges and I am pleased to be able to be engaged with them in my role.

Thank you.

¹ http://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/LFR_SAF0UR/LFR_UnemploymentRate accessed 29 January 2019.

² Average Weekly Earnings (ABS Cat No 6302.0) <https://www.treasury.tas.gov.au/Documents/Average-Weekly-Earnings.pdf> accessed 29 January 2019

³ See their website at <https://26ten.tas.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>