



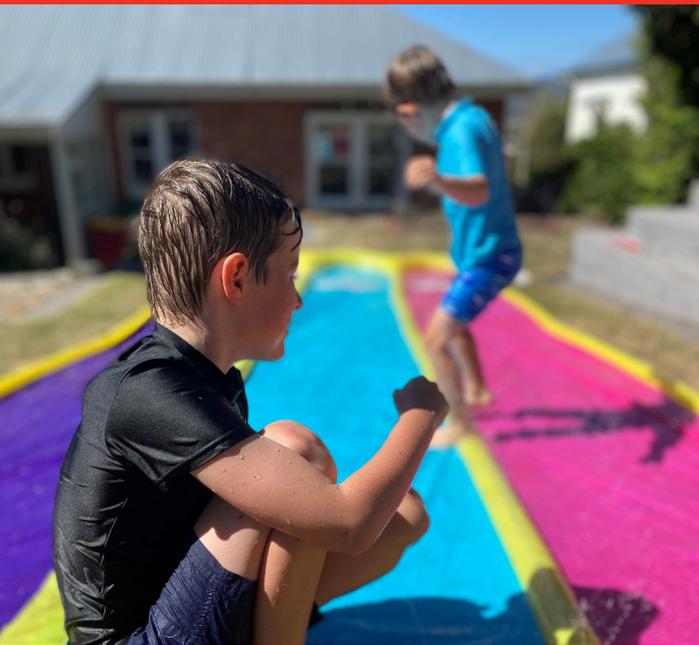
UNIVERSITY of  
**TASMANIA**

# Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

Peter Underwood Centre Submission

University of Tasmania

March 2021



## Acknowledgement

The submission was prepared on *lutruwita* (Tasmania) Aboriginal land. We acknowledge, with deep respect the traditional owners of this land, the palawa people.

The palawa people belong to the oldest continuing culture in the world. They cared for and protected Country for thousands of years. They knew this land, they lived on the land and they died on these lands. We honour them.

We pay respects to elders past and present and to the many Aboriginal people that did not make elder status and to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community that continue to care for Country.

We recognise a history of truth which acknowledges the impacts of invasion and colonisation upon Aboriginal people resulting in the forcible removal from their lands.

Our Island is deeply unique, with spectacular landscapes with our cities and towns surrounded by bushland, wilderness, mountain ranges and beaches.

We stand for a future that profoundly respects and acknowledges Aboriginal perspectives, culture, language and history. And a continued effort to fight for Aboriginal justice and rights paving the way for a strong future.

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## Introduction

Launched in 2015, the Peter Underwood Centre is a partnership between the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Government in association with the Office of the Governor of Tasmania.

During his time as Tasmania's 27<sup>th</sup> Governor, the Honourable Peter Underwood AC, began conversations with the University of Tasmania around the importance of educational attainment to Tasmania. Following his passing in 2014, the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment was established in his name, serving to honour his belief in the transformative power of education.

Our focus is on research, partnerships and initiatives that contribute to positive and sustained change in educational outcomes for children and young people.

Our work spans three pillars of action, each contributing to our vision. The pillars have been drawn from interactions with international research, policy makers and practitioners.

## Our Vision and Strategic Pillars

**All young Tasmanians flourish through the transformative power of learning**

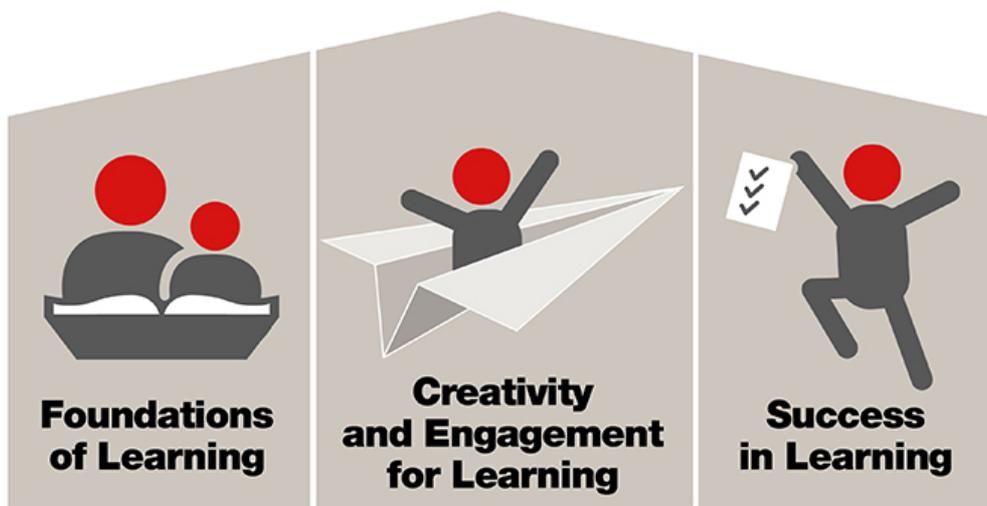


Figure 1. Peter Underwood Centre Vision

Our pillars underpin our aim to:

- Research and inform policy and practice in order to improve learning outcomes for children and young people;
- Facilitate and evaluate collaborative programs, initiatives and activities that support and address engagement and success in learning; and
- Foster and contribute to best practice research, policy and programs which make a difference to young people.

Our research focus is to produce knowledge on educational attainment that is of direct benefit to Tasmanians and that both learns from, and informs, national and international research. Our research connects with local, national, and international organisations, think tanks, policy groups, and allied professional groups to share information and knowledge.

Along with research, our Centre is focussed on creating, delivering, and supporting programs and initiatives that contribute to positive and sustained change in educational outcomes for children and young people. Along with young people themselves, we are honoured to work with a range of partners including schools, teachers, parents, industry, and community members as well as those within the University who contribute to the vision of the Peter Underwood Centre.

The Peter Underwood Centre thanks the Tasmanian Government for the opportunity to make a submission about the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy. We give permission for our submission to be made publicly available.

We note the interdependent nature of the domains articulated in the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy discussion paper and the critical importance of each. We confine our submission to two topics that are centrally connected with our work: the first thousand days and the domain of learning.

**Part 1: First thousand days**



## *The first thousand days are a key time to support children and their families*

There is an accepted body of knowledge about the critical importance of investments in the first thousand days of a child's life. Learning begins the moment a child is born, and with 80% of brain development occurring in the first three years, this is a time that can have the greatest impact on a child's learning into the future. Early development also shapes future health and well-being<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that messages about the criticality of the early years, are comprehensively understood.

Early childhood provides unique opportunities to support human capability development across multiple generations at the same time – with children and the adults caring for them (typically parents and grandparents) or whoever are the family around the child<sup>2</sup>. In the Tasmanian context, the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) has identified that a number of children are developmentally at-risk and vulnerable against the five developmental domains<sup>3</sup>.

The Peter Underwood Centre has identified an opportunity to have a positive impact, at scale, on this period through an evidence-informed initiative, 'The Basics,' which originated in Boston the United States.

'The Basics' deploys knowledge about effective parenting and care giving behaviours to narrow achievement gaps that tend to appear in the first few years of life. These gaps appear early and tend to widen over the life-course. 'The Basics' is based on five principles of early-childhood parenting, distilled from research by the Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI) at Harvard University, with the aid of an advisory committee of early childhood scholars.

## *'The Basics' is built around simple, clear and evidence-based messages*

'The Basics' connects evidence from behavioural economics and early childhood research. At its heart it is based on the **socio-ecological saturation** of five key principles:



Figure 2. 'The Basics' five key principles

<sup>1</sup> L'Hôte, E., Hawkins, N., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2019). *Talking About Early Childhood Development in Australia: Interim Guide for Communicators*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>2</sup> *Towards a National Child Wellbeing Strategy* | Australian Human Rights Commission

<sup>3</sup> Australian Early Development Census. (2018). *A snapshot of early childhood development in Australia*.

Retrieved from <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2018-aedc-national-report>

Each of the five principles in 'The Basics' is strongly grounded in a body of research. 'The Basics' establishes that families' everyday routines, which most of us might take for granted, matter fundamentally to early brain development. Many of the practices that embody 'The Basics' are things that caregivers do already, but not as intentionally as they might if they understood the potential impacts.

The purpose of 'The Basics' is to help community stakeholders and families with infants and toddlers tap into the power they have to shape children's futures. The aim is that every family should have the information and support they need to make the most of the knowledge that contemporary science has made available.

Children develop within an environment of relationships that begins in the family but also involves other adults who play important roles in their lives. This can include extended family members, providers of early care and education, medical professionals, social workers, businesses, and trusted neighbours.

'The Basics' has been designed as a socio-ecological saturation model that provides a common framework for families, agencies and the broader community to support important foundations of learning and wellbeing. To promote the messaging, the 'Basics Community Toolkit' is an online (and free) collection of videos, activities, handouts, and other materials designed to support the program. The resources can be customised for individual communities, and as a growing international program are available in a range of languages.

### *Pilot program*

#### Pilot Program: *'The Basics' Tasmania* (Channel)

A pilot in the Channel area began in 2019 in response to data that children who came to the school were not meeting the expected developmental milestones. *The Basics Tasmania* commenced through the work of a committed and connected network of individuals and organisations from the Channel community who collectively understood the importance and lifelong benefits of strong healthy development, from pregnancy to 3 years of age. It was launched by Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Kate Warner AC in 2019.

The objective of *The Basics Tasmania* is a reduction in vulnerability and improvement in developmental outcomes, measured through whole-of-community change in Australian Early Years Development Census trend lines. *The Basics Tasmania* is building on the vision of the Tasmanian Government-endorsed B4 Early Years Coalition.

The pilot was led by Margate Primary School, with the creation of a community-wide steering committee, with representatives from the Peter Underwood Centre, early childhood education and care leaders, local government, allied health professionals, government agencies, and independent schools. The pilot has been supported by a small grant from the AEDC as well as in-kind and other support from partners such as the Kingborough Council, Libraries Tasmania, Connect 42, the Peter Underwood Centre, and Southern Christian College.

'The Basics' offered the community simple messages that could be adopted by a range of organisations and businesses to build effective partnerships with families and the community. The resources were tailored to the local community using photographs and voices of local residents (see <https://www.thebasicstasmania.com/about>).

Since the pilot commenced there has been interest and resource-sharing with the Royal Hobart Hospital as well as community child health nurses, local government, and early childhood education and care providers. The five principles of 'The Basics' were shared through parent evenings, classroom displays, Seesaw postings, Facebook and newsletter information, brochures going home to all families, pop-ups, and events in the local library, as well as a number of community-based events pre-Covid-19.

With funding support of the B4 Early Years Coalition, Kingborough Council has secured a small grant to embed Basics messaging within a Community Storytelling methodology to increase community knowledge and understanding of the importance of the early years through storytelling techniques.

The pilot has generated significant interest from other communities including Georgetown, the Huon, and Rokeby.

### *Ecological saturation requires new ways of connecting people with information and support*

A key challenge with any community-wide initiative is ensuring the messages reach all of the intended audience. Insights (SMS) messaging has been implemented and evaluated in Boston, USA as an important component of 'The Basics.' Parents receive regular SMS messages, with developmentally appropriate guidance to parents and caregivers. The messaging builds on and supports broader targeted supports and interventions. Insights text messaging uses behavioural science methodologies to 'nudge' people to follow through on a range of beneficial behaviours for their children.

Simple goal-setting and reminders can motivate parents to do things that they want to do but often fail to implement. This is important because many interventions have tried to change parental behaviour with little success. These behavioural tools provide an innovative and effective way to help parents engage their children more often and more productively<sup>4</sup>.

It has several features that distinguish it from other existing initiatives:

- A three-year 'curriculum' spanning birth to age three. Parents and caregivers can participate at any point.
- Two messages per week. The first message shares a science-based developmentally appropriate 'fact'. The second message suggests a call to action and offers a 'try this' specific suggestion for the caregiver related to the previous fact.
- The content each week is aligned with one of the five principles and can be used in combination with other Basics materials, such as videos and handouts from 'The Basics' Community Toolkit.

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<sup>4</sup> Susan E. Mayer et al., "Using Behavioural Insights to Increase Parental Engagement: The Parents and Children Together (PACT) Intervention," National Bureau of Economic Research (2015). Available: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w21602>

The messages are designed to increase the impact of Basics-related conversations in healthcare, childcare, and other community settings by providing parents and caregivers with behavioural nudges to reinforce ‘The Basics’ principles in the course of everyday routines. Examples illustrating progression relating to the principle of ‘talk, sing and point’ are provided in figure 3, below.

**Importantly, the messages address the caregiver’s own wellbeing and social-emotional needs.**

Age	Basics Principle	FACT	TRY THIS
 Week 17	<i>Talk, Sing, and Point</i>	FACT: Your baby is experimenting with making sounds and learning that they get your attention. By responding, you encourage them to keep practicing! You are building their language and communication skills.	TRY THIS: When your baby makes a sound, show excitement in your face and voice. Let them finish so they know you are listening. Then respond with real words. See how long you can keep the "conversation" going back and forth by responding to their sounds and expressions.
 Week 61	<i>Talk, Sing, and Point</i>	FACT: Your child is talking (or trying) more and more. They will make mistakes along the way, but no one loves to be corrected.  Instead, we all like positive encouragement.	TRY THIS: These days, when your child says something incorrectly, just repeat it the correct way. There's no need to try to get them to say it correctly. Over time they'll hear the difference. Eventually, they'll get it right.
 Week 101	<i>Talk, Sing, and Point</i>	FACT: Children like to know that you are paying attention to them. They will make more of an effort to think and talk if they know that you will listen and respond in a supportive way.	TRY THIS: Show your child you are listening carefully. This may mean avoiding distractions, such as your phone. If you are busy, stop to say, "Wait a minute until I finish this, then we can talk. Okay?" Assure them that you are interested in what they have to say.
 Week 144	<i>Talk, Sing, and Point</i>	FACT: Your child may ask tons of questions. When you ask a question back, instead of just giving the answer, you help them develop problem-solving skills and confidence.	TRY THIS: Involve your child in answering their own questions. When they ask a question, respond, "Hmm, what do you think?" Listen and show that you value their ideas. Have a back-and-forth conversation.

Figure 3. Talk, Sing, and Point messages for weeks 17, 61, 101, and 144

*'The Basics' has a well-developed chain of impact framework that facilitates ongoing evaluation and monitoring*

The founder of 'The Basics' Dr Ronald F. Ferguson, is an MIT-trained economist who focuses social science research on economic, social, and educational challenges<sup>5</sup>. His broader work on intentional change is clearly evident in the design of the program, and the evaluation methodology. A clear chain of impact has been established for 'The Basics' and reflected in embedded evaluation for each of the key groups (local partners/organisations; parents, caregivers and young children). As a part of 'The Basics' international community, *The Basics Tasmania* has access to the evaluation tools, as well as comparative data.

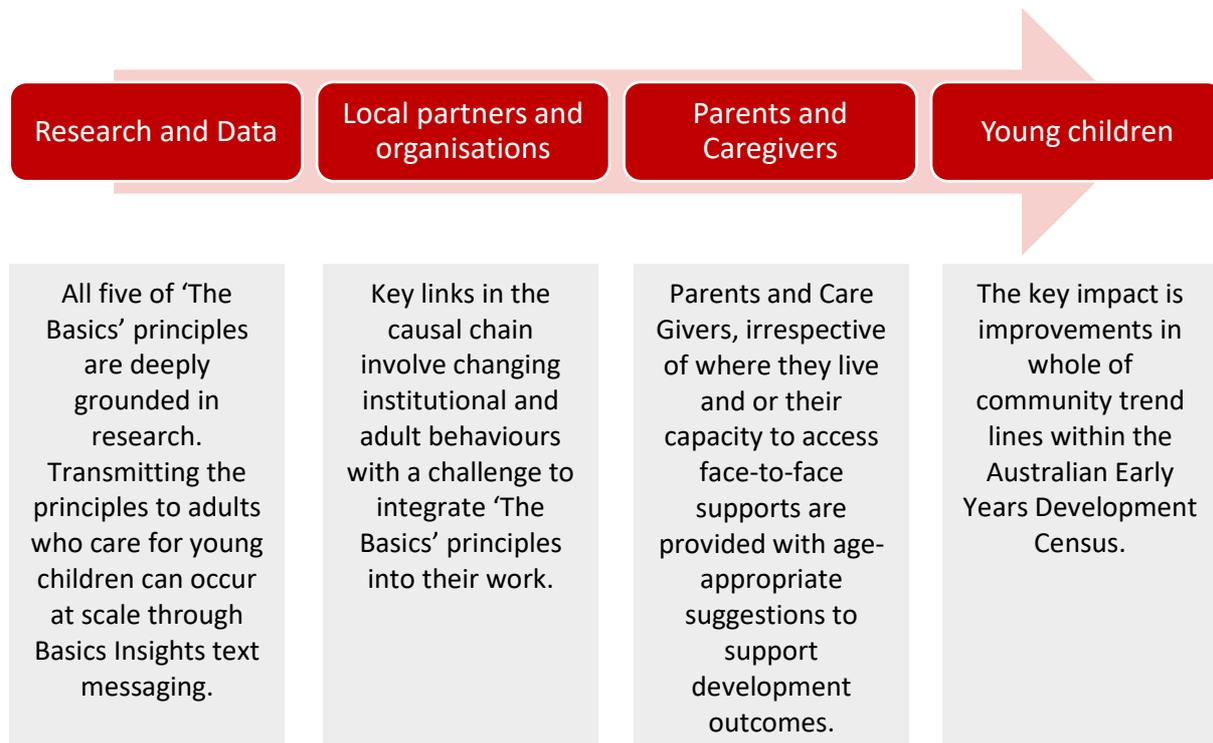


Figure 4. Chain of impacts

Support for the program at community level, demonstrated by level of understanding, visibility of the program and evidence of embedding in practice is the first lead indicator of this model. Familiarity with, and practice of the principles by parents and caregivers is the next key outcome. Finally, evidence of positive outcomes to the young children themselves can be tracked through the AEDC and other early childhood screening.

The evidence gathered to date in the United States suggests that if a family of any racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group routinely employs practices aligned with 'The Basics' principles in caring for their child, it will have important positive impacts upon multiple domains of the child's early development and raise their prospects for success in a 21st-century society<sup>6</sup>.

Using the established methodology, a small-scale evaluation has been conducted for the Channel Basics. A survey sample of community members and carers in December 2019 and February 2020

<sup>5</sup> <https://boston.thebasics.org/en/news/index/content/2019/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://toolkit.thebasics.org/media/19199/science-behind-the-basics-3a.pdf>

suggested that the predominant source of information for support with parenting was friends and grandparents.

The pilot suggests:

- Interest in and support for the initiative in this and other communities.
- Parents and caregivers tend not to access GPs, child health nurses and other services.
- Direct messaging is a service gap.

It is important to note that Insights messaging was not part of the Channel Basics pilot.



Figure 5. 'The Basics' poster



*Figure 6. Four levels of implementation over the proposed four years of implementation at scale*

An at scale (state-wide) roll out of 'The Basics' is feasible in Tasmania. The Peter Underwood Centre at the University of Tasmania has secured an intellectual property agreement to facilitate the growth of 'The Basics' in Tasmania.

A proposed model would incorporate:

1. A backbone organisation to facilitate quality control; information, share developed resources, create connections and oversee ongoing embedded evaluation.
2. Community-based hubs (Local Government/Libraries) that could facilitate community actions (e.g. dissemination of information, advertising/hosting of events to support 'The Basics' at a local level).

3. State-wide Insights messaging. If funding was available, **universal** support for parents and caregivers across Tasmania through the Insights messaging would be possible. Data from the Australian Digital Inclusion Report 2020 suggests that since 2017 digital access and ability has been improving in Tasmania, with mobile phone ownership close to 90% Australia-wide<sup>78</sup>.

Potential opportunities in Tasmania		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universal Insights Text Messaging for all live births in Tasmania.</li> </ul>	And/Or	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insights Text Messaging for all live births within local government areas who are introducing 'The Basics' community model.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resourcing additional communities to support local governance and implementation.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resourcing five existing services (such as Child and Family Centre, School, Libraries Tas) to support local governance and implementation (YR 1 0.4 FTE, YR 2 0.2FTE, YR 3 0.2FTE).</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnering with the Peter Underwood Centre to fund formative evaluation and data linkage through the Tasmanian Data Linkage Unit.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnering with the Peter Underwood Centre to fund formative evaluation and data linkage through the Tasmanian Data Linkage Unit.</li> </ul>

Figure 7. Potential opportunities in Tasmania

Research and evaluation could draw from and share within the research evaluation network of 'The Basics' in the United States and contribute to expanding our knowledge base about what works and what does not in the early years.

Finally, there is the potential for data linkage between the business intelligence from the Insights text messaging, user self-report, and State Government Agency utilisation data. The Peter Underwood Centre, in collaboration with 'The Basics', would structure evaluation around a logic model that allows us to do theory-based evaluation. This complements impact evaluation, which concerns whether outcomes are different from what they would have been if we had not intervened.

<sup>7</sup> Measuring Australia's Digital Divide, The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020 (RMIT University, Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne, Telstra).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/Economics/deloitte-au-economics-mobile-nation-2019-080419.pdf>

### *Strategic alignment*

'The Basics' is consistent with the aims of *Tasmania's Strategy for Children: Pregnancy to Eight Years 2018-2021*.

'The Basics' adopts a public health approach in which universal Insights messaging (phone call + data linkage), reinforces existing initiatives such as B4 community story-tellers and targeted supports (such as CHaPs, Child and Family Learning Centres, *Working Together*, *Launch into Learning*, *Connected Beginnings*, *cu@home*), and leverages investment in community-based resources such as Child and Family Centres, Libraries and Launching into Learning.

Importantly, the universal Insights messaging ameliorates three of the key challenges to achieving *scale of impact* in Tasmania: transport, access, and equity. Resources are also available in languages other than English, including Somali, Nepali, Arabic, and Spanish.

**Part 2: Learning**



## Learning

This domain of wellbeing is at the heart of the vision of the Peter Underwood Centre, which is that:

“All young Tasmanians flourish through the transformative power of learning”

The Peter Underwood Centre vision emphasises equity (i.e. “all”) and a strength-based perspective both to children and young people themselves and to the adults who support their learning.

As outlined in our introduction, the Centre contributes to achieving this vision through research, partnerships, and outreach activities. All our work highlights that:

There is a two-way relationship between learning and wellbeing	There are significant inequalities among young Tasmanians in relation to learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Wellbeing-for-learning: wellbeing is a key foundation for enabling learning.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Resources that support learning are inequitably distributed.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Learning-for-wellbeing: learning is a key component of, and contributor to, overall wellbeing.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Some groups of young Tasmanians face significant barriers to accessing learning.</li></ul>

Figure 8. Findings in relation to learning

## Access to learning

Schools play a central role in the delivery and/or coordination of wellbeing and learning support, both through targeted initiatives and through the ‘every day’ work of teachers in schools. The central barrier to accessing this support is children not being at school:

- Formalised absences, due to part-time enrolment as well as suspensions and expulsion;
- Low attendance, due to life circumstances and disadvantage, such as the impact of trauma, financial difficulties, and caring responsibilities;
- Hiatus in attendance due to change in school of enrolment.

Below we outline key evidence from our research, partnerships, and outreach about *barriers* to the intertwined supports for wellbeing-for-learning and learning-for-wellbeing in relation to three key aspects: struggling with learning, trauma and marginalisation.

### 1. Struggling with learning

When students struggle with learning this is not only an ‘education’ concern but also a ‘wellbeing’ concern. Informed by our research, we address this in relation to literacy, learning support and innovative approaches.

### *Literacy*

Strong literacy capability is essential both for learning in school and for life beyond the classroom. Poor literacy is a community-wide issue in Tasmania which exists throughout the developmental stages of life and into adulthood. Poor functional literacy skills have life-long implications for individuals and the community<sup>9</sup>. Students who struggle with literacy end up struggling with many other aspects of school. This has a detrimental effect on their mental health.

The largest group of students identified by school staff in our research<sup>10</sup> as needing extra literacy support were referred to as simply 'struggling' with learning, without a diagnosed learning disability. These students were not meeting benchmarks and were deemed to be at risk of falling behind in their literacy development. Without a formal diagnosis access to specific supports can be more challenging to access. For students with mental health concerns, the interconnection between wellbeing and learning can be especially poignant. A classroom teacher in this project stated:

I actually have about five [students] with high anxiety rather than other behaviours. So, if they don't have success they find it very confronting and distressing. [unpublished]

### *Learning support*

Several of our projects have highlighted the commitment to providing tailored support and increased use of Individual Learning Plans in Tasmanian government schools<sup>11</sup>. Without such support there is a significant risk that students fall further behind in their learning. However, despite the commitment of education systems and schools, there are not enough allied professional staff (especially school psychologists and speech pathologists) and there is not enough time to ensure every student receives all the support they need.

Previous research by Centre staff has shown that if a learning difficulty has not been identified, then students may be perceived as not trying hard enough, rather than as needing additional support<sup>12</sup>. Students in this research said that they felt some teachers "rush things", giving as an example:

I found it very difficult at my old school to try and concentrate and learn. I was always behind with that and they didn't really help me out. I'd try and write it down as quick as I could and then they'd wipe it off [the whiteboard].

Staff were concerned that the curriculum tends to be "directed towards the middle level" and as a result "the lower kids were totally lost"<sup>13</sup>. Some students may react in ways that are disruptive, because they are frustrated or to 'hide' that they do not understand. If this leads to suspension then their access to learning is reduced, which may result in falling behind further.

### *Innovative approaches*

Students may also struggle with learning because they are not engaged by the usual ways in which the curriculum is organised and taught. Several initiatives in the Tasmanian Department of Education

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<sup>9</sup> A roadmap to a Literate Tasmania, <https://www.tasmanianliteracyalliance.org/>

<sup>10</sup> Review of Literacy Teaching, Training, and Practice in Government Schools:

<https://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre/research/completed-projects>

<sup>11</sup> Review of Literacy Teaching, Training, and Practice in Government Schools; Impact of Graduate Certificate of Inclusive Education: <https://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre/research/completed-projects>

<sup>12</sup> *Re-imagining Schooling for Education* <https://eprints.utas.edu.au/25316/> and *Putting the jigsaw together: Flexible Learning Programs in Australia Final Report* <http://ecite.utas.edu.au/113856>

<sup>13</sup> *Re-imagining Schooling for Education*, p. 58 and p.61 <https://eprints.utas.edu.au/25316/>

are aimed at offering formal learning in different ways to better engage these students. This includes three initiatives in secondary education which we have conducted research on: Packages of Learning<sup>14</sup>, School-based Apprenticeships<sup>15</sup>, and Big Picture Education<sup>16</sup>.

Our research has highlighted the ways in which these innovative initiatives harness students' interests in more applied and creative approaches to learning. Overall, the research findings noted many benefits for learning and wellbeing. We also found some aspects that limit student access to these initiatives and the benefits they offer.

- Caps on numbers in a program or site inevitably mean that not all students who are interested can take part. The selection criteria used to determine where a program is offered and who is able to enrol may end up having a side-effect of excluding students who would most benefit from the initiative. For example this was discussed in our report on our evaluation of the Launceston Big Picture School<sup>17</sup>.
- Access can also be limited due to misunderstandings or contradictory understandings about the purpose of the initiative. For example there was a variety of views about whether Packages of Learning was aimed to support student engagement or (in contrast) to provide a vocational learning and pipeline to certain industries. In relation to Australian School-based Apprenticeships, understandings about what constitutes cultural safety and support varied, and some workplaces did not have strong and supportive approaches to cultural recognition.

## 2. Trauma

The negative impact of trauma on wellbeing and on learning is widely recognised<sup>18</sup>. Schools can play a significant role to reduce the negative impacts of trauma on children and young people. Two aspects are of particular importance: not being at school, and impacts on learning.

### *Not being at school*

Our rapid response report about the effect of learning at home during COVID-19<sup>19</sup> highlighted that schools are often a safe place for students. Moreover, school staff are crucial in monitoring whether students may be at risk of abuse, both as mandatory reporters and simply by keeping an eye out for students. One education system staff member explained:

We have identified concerns for children and young people who may not be safe at home due to family violence issues. For this group, school becomes a safe place to report, or a place where trained educators, and trusted adults who know the students, can check in, or tune in to clues that there may be a risk to the wellbeing of the student. Without a physical

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<sup>14</sup> Packages of Learning evaluation: <https://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre/research/completed-projects>

<sup>15</sup> Impact evaluation of the Aboriginal Student Engagement Australian School-based Apprenticeship: <https://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre/research/completed-projects>

<sup>16</sup> Launceston Big Picture School Evaluation: <https://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre/research/completed-projects>

<sup>17</sup> *An Evaluation of the Launceston Big Picture School*, pp. 42-43. <http://ecite.utas.edu.au/139745>

<sup>18</sup> E.g. see

<https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/library/Shared%20Documents/Child%20and%20Student%20Wellbeing%20Strategy.pdf> and

<https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/library/Shared%20Documents/Child-and-Student-Wellbeing-Mental-Wellbeing-Action-Plan.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> *Learning at home during COVID-19: Effects on vulnerable young Australians*. <http://ecite.utas.edu.au/139877>

connection to the school, the opportunities for these young people to report that they are feeling unsafe are restricted<sup>20</sup>.

For this same reason, not being at school full time due to disciplinary sanctions, part-time enrolment or low attendance is a barrier to the ability of school staff to notice concerns and arrange for suitable support. School can only be a safe place for students if they are actually there.

### *Impacts on learning*

In our major project on Literacy Teaching, Training and Practice<sup>21</sup> school staff gave many examples of the impact of trauma on literacy, as well as on learning more broadly. A participant in our research described having a “student in my class who ... is a humanitarian refugee [with] severe trauma and learning is just the last thing that is on his radar at the moment”<sup>22</sup>. Others pointed to students who had a stutter, mental health concerns, or behavioural concerns due to trauma. Some participants gave examples of the key support school psychologists and social workers can provide, but many also pointed out that the demand for such support outstripped supply.

Staff appreciated the fact that there could be flexible approaches to attendance for traumatised children, for example, the option of enrolling a student part-time to reduce pressure for trauma affected children [unpublished]. When well-supported this can be very helpful. However, caution is needed that part-time enrolment should not be a permanent approach. Rather, it can be a transition period, to provide the supports needed that enable return to full-time enrolment.

### 3. Marginalisation

Some students face particularly significant disadvantage and potential marginalisation, often due to cumulative and intersecting structural issues outside their control. Often, what they have in common are experiences of poverty. Thrown into sharp relief by COVID-19<sup>23</sup>, these students may not have safe and secure housing or may live in overcrowded homes where learning is difficult; and often do not have access to adequate food and nutrition. Schools can (and often do) provide support for all of this, either directly or through collaboration with other agencies. Again, access to this support relies on students being enrolled and attending.

Three groups are highlighted in the work of the Peter Underwood Centre.

- Teenage parents: Despite the high aspirations of many pregnant and parenting teens, and despite legal protections of their right to education, these young people face many barriers to accessing education<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> *Learning at home during COVID-19: Effects on vulnerable young Australians*, p.13. <http://ecite.utas.edu.au/139877>

<sup>21</sup> Review of Literacy Teaching, Training, and Practice in Government Schools: <https://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre/research/completed-projects>

<sup>22</sup> *Literacy Teaching Practice in Tasmanian Schools. Stakeholder Report*, p.29. <http://ecite.utas.edu.au/135644>

<sup>23</sup> *Learning at home during COVID-19: Effects on vulnerable young Australians*, chapter 2.2 and 3.6. <http://ecite.utas.edu.au/139877>

<sup>24</sup> *Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) Trial - Independent Evaluation* <http://ecite.utas.edu.au/140596> and *Teen parents. Fact sheet 14/2020* <https://eprints.utas.edu.au/35397/>

- Children and young people in Out of Home Care: Instability in OOHC placement means these students frequently experience a hiatus in attendance due to change in school of enrolment, as well as having to adjust to a new school<sup>25</sup>.
- Youth justice: Many children and young people who come before the youth court have experienced trauma, have mental health concerns, and have a disrupted education<sup>26</sup>.

There are other groups that are also likely to require high levels of support, but these have not been directly part of our work to date.

### *Improving access to learning*

Improving access to wellbeing and learning in school would benefit from initiatives across policy areas and agencies, including:

- School education sectors (government, Catholic, Independent) to support schools to:
  - reduce the use of part-time enrolment, suspension and expulsion through productive student engagement approaches (including trauma-informed practice) and collaboration with families and case workers;
  - minimise disruption to the student’s learning while the student is on part-time enrolment, suspended or expelled;
  - facilitate a smooth return to (full time) learning in class as soon as possible; and
  - provide targeted learning support for struggling students, including for literacy.

For government schools, the “Secretary’s Instructions No 4 for Suspension, Exclusion, Expulsion or Prohibition of State School Students” provide valuable guidance as a starting point for enhanced support for schools.

- Other agencies and government departments (e.g. OOHC providers, Courts, disability support services, housing):
  - provide practical support to addressing factors behind absenteeism, such as financial assistance, food, transport, homework support, and mentoring;
  - prioritise the provision of stable housing for homeless minors and families with school-age children; and
  - support schools to enable attendance by vulnerable students, for example through information-sharing with schools and a joint approach to therapeutic support for students.

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Underwood Staff contribute to the work by the Commissioner for Children and Young People to monitor of out-of-home care in Tasmania. <https://www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/out-of-home-care-monitoring/>

<sup>26</sup> *Improving educational connection for young people in custody* <http://ecite.utas.edu.au/134257> and *Educational Transition from Custody: Final report* <http://ecite.utas.edu.au/140598>

Moreover, collaboration between all agencies is essential, as highlighted in the diagram.



Figure 7. Collaboration

Our research into the response to COVID-19 in schools recognised that there was:

Prioritisation of the wellbeing of particularly vulnerable students [that] has also sharpened inter-agency collaboration and ways of working<sup>27</sup>.

Our informants noted that there was an unprecedented level of information sharing and flow between government departments and agencies that developed rapidly and organically during this period. The power of this collaborative effort was seen to positively impact on students and their families, and to enable solutions to challenges as they arose.

Continuing to break down silos, and working to facilitate information sharing and collaboration amongst those working with vulnerable children and their families, should not be lost as we move into the post-COVID world. Barriers to wellbeing, and learning are not easily overcome without a joined-up approach. This could be facilitated by:

1. Developing a common vision across government agencies informed by quantitative and qualitative data.
2. Sharing of processes and practice.
3. Protocols and governance that allow access to common data sets and information sharing.
4. Closer and more collaborative case management.

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<sup>27</sup> *Learning at home during COVID-19: Effects on vulnerable young Australians*, p.54, <http://ecite.utas.edu.au/139877>

## Conclusion / summary

In a context of national and global interest in aligning efforts to enhance child and youth wellbeing, the Peter Underwood Centre thanks and acknowledges the efforts of the Tasmanian Government to consult on the development of a new strategy.

The Tasmanian government previously collated and published data sets that were of great value to inform and assist policy makers, service providers, and researchers to understand the Tasmanian context<sup>28</sup>. Understanding Tasmanian demographics and unique features enables awareness of gaps, needs and opportunities. It also enhances our ability to adopt shared-whole-of-community responses.

The Peter Underwood Centre is a partnership between the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Government. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the contents of our submission in further detail and to join a research alliance focused on key issues.

### Key Messages

- The first thousand days are a key time to support children and their families.
- ‘The Basics’ is built around simple, clear and evidence-based messages to support early childhood development.
- Insights messaging provides an innovative way to connect to, communicate with and support parents and caregivers.
- ‘The Basics’ has a well-developed chain of impact framework that can link data to facilitate ongoing evaluation, monitoring and improvement against the AEDC domains.
- Connection to full-time learning is essential for all students, both as an aspect of wellbeing, and as an enabler of other wellbeing domains. Full-time participation is especially crucial for vulnerable children and young people. This requires:
  - Targeted support for vulnerable students in schools and other agencies, and
  - Collaboration between education providers and other agencies
- Schools are a central site for inter-agency collaboration to support children and young people whose wellbeing and/or learning is at risk, especially in relation to experiences of trauma.
- Monitoring the effectiveness and accessibility of initiatives, and identifying gaps and areas for improvement, requires proactive and systematic use of publicly accessible qualitative and quantitative data.
- Research alliances and partnerships to support evaluation and knowledge dissemination are critically important to monitoring what works and, importantly, what does not.

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<sup>28</sup> Kids Come First Report 2009: Outcomes for Children and Young People in Tasmania, Tasmanian Government



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