

Just don't call them "Leavers' Dinners" - please

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The year is drawing to a close and so over the next few weeks 15- and 16-year olds at Tasmania's State high schools will be frocking or suiting up to attend what they, their parents and their schools like to call "Leavers' Dinners".

Lest anyone think otherwise, I am *not* against young people (or anyone else) dressing up and having a celebrating their achievements. But I do despair at the message which calling these events "Leavers' Dinners" sends both to those who attend them and to others who have yet to reach that stage of their education. It says that it's OK to regard Year 10 as an "exit point" from the education system. And that's a great pity, not just for young people who do cease their formal education at Year 10, but for Tasmania as a whole.

According to figures published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, fewer than 71% of Tasmanian students who were in Year 10 in 2008 had gone onto Year 12 in 2010. That's a higher proportion than in previous years, but it's still significantly lower than in any other part of Australia except the Northern Territory, and almost 8 percentage points lower than the national average. In 2010, the retention rate to Year 12 was actually higher in government schools than in non-government schools. But most years, it's the other way round: in 2008, the retention rate from Year 10 to Year 12 was 10 percentage points lower in government schools than in other schools.

It's hard to avoid the conclusion that the below-average rates of participation by Tasmanian teenagers in upper secondary education are at least partly due to the fact that Tasmania's State high schools are the only ones that don't go beyond Year 10 – with the exception of the ACT, which is a very different social and economic milieu from Tasmania. If having separate 'matriculation colleges' (as they were called when they were first established in Tasmania in the 1960s) was such a good idea, the likelihood is that other States would have copied it. But they haven't. And that ought to make Tasmanians ponder the wisdom of maintaining separate institutions for Years 11 and 12.

There are of course other reasons for the failure of such a large proportion of Tasmanians to undertake a complete secondary education. Parental attitudes, in particular, are a big factor. Too many Tasmanian parents think, "I left school at Year 10 and I did all right, so what does it matter if my son or daughter doesn't go on to Year 11 and Year 12. Others think, "if my son or daughter goes on to Year 11 and Year 12, he or she will then go on to university, and then have to go and get a job on the mainland, and I'll never see him or her and my grandchildren".

Attitudes such as these are selling young Tasmanians short. As recently as a generation ago, a Year 10 education may have been sufficient for most of the jobs that were available. But today, it isn't. There's a clear and unambiguous body of evidence which shows that kids who 'drop out' of formal education at Year 10 (and 'dropping out' is how leaving at Year 10 should be seen) have a much higher probability of being unemployed than those who stay longer in formal education, and if they do find work they'll get paid less for it than those who have stayed on in school (and beyond).

One of the reasons why Tasmania needs to spend less on unnecessarily small schools is so that it can afford to spend more ensuring that a higher proportion of our young people get a full twelve years of school education, and aren't short-changed by leaving after ten years.

To those who are approaching the end of Year 10, I say enjoy your end-of-year celebrations, but please see them as a milestone on the way to further learning, not as the final point of your education.

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