

I am the mother of three teenagers and have been heavily involved in the schools at which my children attend. In January we moved to Sydney as we needed to move for my husband's work. Our son had just completed year 12 at Launceston College, receiving an ATAR of 98.7, after attending Riverside Primary and High Schools. He is now studying a Bachelor of Advanced Science (Honours) majoring in Physics at Monash University.

Our daughters had just finished year 10 and 7 at Riverside High School, so are completing their schooling in Sydney. The comparison between the two systems is mind boggling, and I have to say that Tasmania is far far superior to NSW.

Other than the age thing- Sydney kids often finish year 12 at 17 rather than 18 as what is called Kinder here is our Prep, and the ages work on a financial year rather than a calendar year, the lack of subject choice at year 11-12 is very disappointing. Year 12 study begins in Term 4 year 11, after final year 11 exams at the end of Term 3.

We deliberately selected a school ranked in the top 20% of Sydney, but not too large, about 800 students, so a similar size to Riverside High. The children choose six subjects in year 11 which they may drop to 5 for year 12 if they wish- however this is very much discouraged. English (three options, from basic, advanced, extension) is compulsory, Maths is to be compulsory in the next year or so (definitely will be by the time my youngest comes through), once again with a range of levels, effectively leaving four choices.

In the Tasmanian system, our son completed four complete subjects, eight in total, in each of his two years, with the wonderful fortune built into the Tasmanian system of having specialist teachers for the exceedingly high level of teaching required for Physics, Chemistry and Specialised Mathematics. This is simply not available in NSW, the broad range of knowledge required for multiple grades and levels of maths, or any other high end academic subject, is generally not available. All teachers across all states are dedicated amazing people, who do their best, however the Tasmanian system does allow for specialisation which is hugely advantageous to our students.

Our daughter gets to choose four subjects (allowing for compulsory English and Maths). She does not get to explore subjects she had wanted to and could have in Tasmania, eg Psychology and Sociology, she does not get to participate in productions such as Dance Fever or Rock of Ages. The Tasmanian system gives our students the opportunity to "taste" subjects which sound interesting to them, which may well lead to career choices.

The Tasmanian senior secondary system caters so very well for those who wish to excel, for those who wish to follow a vocational education and those who need to attend to complete schooling to their own level. We knew a young man who was disenchanted with education in year 10, really didn't wish to continue, but knew he had to. So he did his level 2 subjects in year 11, rediscovered his love for learning and worked really hard in year 12 to gain an ATAR and go to university. He was determined to go, to complete an extra year if need be- he didn't.

This brings me to another fantastic point about our separate senior secondary system- if a student either becomes ill, disenchanted, mucks up their exams, has personal issues, they can easily complete a third year to complete their education. No-one need know they are completing a "year 13" unless the student chooses to share the information. There is no such option in NSW.

If the retention rate in Tasmania truly included all who were still studying in one form or another, be it in a formal setting or via an apprenticeship, the rate would be higher. If the figures included those working full time, to truly indicate how many unemployed and not being educated, the number would increase even more.

Retention isn't just about having our high schools go through to year 12, in Tasmania, in many pockets, it's a cultural thing, there are generations who have not progressed past year 10 and see no reason for their children to do so. Improving retention is as much about educating those pockets of adults as it is children.

Going down a few grades to year 9, where our youngest daughter begins next year. The subjects the kids choose for year 9 carry on to year 10. Effectively the only years the children have any choice of experiencing subjects they particularly enjoy or wish to explore, is in year 9 and 11, and their choices must be carried for two years. Once again, the range of subjects is significantly less than that of Riverside High. It is not just our school, we have friends with children at other schools, they are the same.

As a by note; the pressure on children in NSW is phenomenal. Many many families spend a great deal of money to have their child tutored before they even start school "so they won't be behind". The pressure from the high school my daughters attend is to exceed at everything all the time is huge. The school is piling the pressure on our kids and we feel like we're doing everything we can to shovel it off! Don't get us wrong, we want our children to do well, to be their best, but it is THEIR best, not the best of everyone.

The Tasmanian School system is excellent. It provides very well for those wishing to exceed, for those wishing to pursue VET courses, for those who need extra time. Give the system the credit it deserves- the NSW system is seriously decades out of date, just because it's the mainland doesn't make it better!