

# If not school, what?

A Paper by the Mid north coast Workforce Australia Taskforce

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*Average school attendance levels<sup>1</sup> in Regional NSW for Years 7 to 10 has progressively fallen from 72.6% in 2016 to 35.8% in 2024.*

[Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority](#)

## Context: youth disengagement

Youth disengagement from schools represents a large and growing issue. It poses us with a profound structural challenge: if young people do not go to school, what *should* they do?

This challenge is underpinned by the truism that the longer people remain disengaged, the harder their journey to reengage.

Our goal with this paper is to survey the terrain and explore opportunities to provide young people between the ages of 14 and 17 who do not want to go to school with pathways to social engagement and employment that meet them where they are at, not where we wish they were.

## Terrain: the importance of schools

Young people in NSW must be enrolled in school until they are 17 or complete year 10. For many people this works. For a growing proportion of young people, it doesn't.

In our society, school is the primary institutional locus for preparing young people for work and life. However, if young people are not attending school, the supports intended to help them can be hard to find: it is hard to help people who are not there!

In addition, our education system tends to privilege academic achievement over skills development and so can be, for this cohort at least, poorly suited. However, the dominance of a school-based approach can make developing non-academic alternatives challenging. For example, vocational opportunities are rarely introduced before Year 11<sup>2</sup>. Non-academically inclined young people are creating a sense of their possible or probable futures well before this.

Indeed, for young people not attending school before Year 11, obligatory registration in school can act as an important *barrier* to their engagement. For example, neither TAFE programs nor the Federal government's pre-employment youth support program *Transition to Work* are available to young people while still enrolled in school. For these youth, obligatory school enrolment can mean being blocked from vocational training opportunities, extended direct work experience or valuable government supports.

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<sup>1</sup> The proportion of students whose attendance in Semester 1 is greater than 90%

<sup>2</sup> The most common exception is students who start a School-Based Apprenticeship or Traineeship in the last term of Year 10.

It is important to state that schools are not failing young people. Our system is failing schools. With finite resources, we expect schools to deliver ever-expanding outcomes and engage ever deeper into the lives of their students to maintain engagement. We can continue to expect ever more of schools, or we can look for alternatives.

## Issues: we need alternatives

Simply asking schools to release students from their obligation to attend so they can access alternatives is not an optimal strategy. Schools retain both a legal and an ethical Duty of Care they will not easily, or in good conscience, relinquish. This is especially true when there is no provision for alternative institutions to assume that duty. School funding is also tied to student numbers, whether the student attends or not.

Schooling is a highly respected and very highly regulated institution with deeply embedded legal, cultural and administrative norms and expectations; an institution fundamentally premised on academic achievement as a path to social success. Teachers, Careers Advisors and School Principals are successful products of this career path. They are professionally required to be strong advocates for academic success and often have limited personal experience in business, trades or agriculture. Under these conditions, expecting schools to provide solid role modelling for non-academic career paths or to release disengaged students to uncertain, sometimes poorly developed non-academic career pathways is unrealistic.

Successful efforts to improve engagement between schools and the local world of business and trades do exist<sup>3</sup>. There are also alternative schooling models evolving that may be starting to address these issues. However as a rule, any engagement between schools and industry occurs on terms set by the schools. This can result in interactions that are not always convenient to industry partners, relevant to small local business or even sometimes to the students themselves. An opaque barrier exists between schools and the larger working community formed by structural issues individual actors are not able to effectively address or reform.

The result is that we are progressively increasing pressure on schools to develop and provide services they were not designed or funded to deliver, including:

- social and mental health support (for students and families);
- vocational skills development and;
- integration with businesses and especially trades and trade-based industries.

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<sup>3</sup> An excellent example is the Regional Industry Engagement Program (RIEP) which provides staff to attempt to navigate the opaque barriers that exist between Industry and Schools. Despite extraordinary local successes, these efforts are inherently ad hoc and personality-dependant.

## Our response: some examples

In the Mid north coast (as elsewhere) government, community and industry *are* innovating to match this challenge. Some models that exist to address these challenges include:

- vocation-based schooling;
- community colleges and;
- industry-based social enterprises.

Other models aimed at addressing these challenges include expanding work experience opportunities and programs specially aimed at combining schooling, vocational education and work experience (for example: school-based apprenticeships and traineeships (SBAT's) and targeted Stage 5 [years 9-10] vocational education). However, these responses remain ad hoc and constrained by our institutional focus on school attendance and academic outcomes.

## Summary: Challenges in evolving the system

The **chicken and egg problem** our education system faces is that to support disengaged young people we need more non-school-based educational models. However, since schools remain the primary delivery vehicle for education, alternatives are not being developed at the speed or scale required.

The **Catch22 disengaged young people face** is that to engage in non-school based activities they must be unenrolled from school but, to be unenrolled from school they must show they are engaged in non-school based activities.

The **theme of this paper** is that supporting disengaged young people to reengage will require more than simply doubling down on attendance or through a renewed focus on academic outcomes. Important as these things are, such a focus fails to address the root-cause of youth disengagement or ultimately, improve the lives of disengaged young people.

The **goal of this paper** is to argue that effective solutions lie in the development and growth of innovative non-school-based models that are *specifically developed to support this cohort of young people*: solutions that do not add pressure on schools but rather integrate with, enhance and support them.

## Next Steps

Serious and genuine efforts are being made to address these issues across Australia. Under the auspices of the *Workforce Australia Program* Mid North Coast Taskforce, institutions and individuals across our region are coming together to better understand and address these challenges. The Taskforce are looking for:

1. partners in the NSW Department of Education to better understand the barriers and opportunities;
2. these issues to be better understood and addressed from a research and policy perspective by both the State and Federal governments;
3. funding opportunities that directly support schools to develop and trial innovative new approaches that integrate academic and skills-based approaches to education.