



# What are Schools for?

## Education Reform in Queensland

September 2003

A YANQ Discussion Paper in plain English

Comments? Questions? Tell us:

[www.yanq.org.au](http://www.yanq.org.au)

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## **Trial Areas for ETRF**

The education reforms talked about in this paper are being tried out in seven 'Trial Areas' of Queensland. The contact people listed here work for Education Queensland. They have specific responsibilities for the areas listed.

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## What's this Discussion Paper for?

This discussion paper has been written by the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland (YANQ). It is mainly for YANQ members. It is to get people talking more about schools and education.

What would *you* like to see happen in Queensland schools? By responding to this Discussion Paper, we can be better informed about what you want to see happen. The YANQ web address and phone numbers are on the front page of this paper.

### 1. What are Schools for?

To ask if Queensland schools are 'working', we have to be clear what our schools are for in the first place.

Schools serve a wide range of needs in Queensland. Some of the most important are:

- to provide students with skills they need to get jobs or get into uni
- to educate students about Australia and Australian culture, so that they can live successfully in this society
- to pass on knowledge for its own sake
- to teach tolerance, understanding and social skills
- to teach children how to learn, so that they can continue learning their whole lives
- to reproduce the values of Australian society (so that as children become adults they share the common values of the society)
- to provide a place where young people are safe while adults are working
- to teach young people how to interact in groups
- to provide social networks and support for young people

Historically, schools have served other purposes. This history still affects how schools operate today. To understand the schools that our young people are learning in now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have to understand their origins.

### 2. A Short History of Queensland Schools

For thousands of years, Indigenous children were successfully taught by their own communities. Indigenous young people learned how to survive economically by hunting, gathering, fishing and trading. They learned how their society functioned from their own people. In some parts of Queensland this still happens.

But this paper is more about education since Europeans arrived. Traditional British ideas about education came to Australia with the First Fleet and have influenced how our schools operate.

Until around 1900, it was taken for granted that education was only for the rich. The children of the poor were mostly unschooled and usually illiterate, both in England and in Australia.

Providing education to poor children in earlier times was seen as unnecessary. These children could be earning money in hard labouring jobs such as washing, cooking, agricultural labour or else caring for other younger children. Great cruelty was the norm. Children of six or seven were expected to work much as adults were.

In 1807 Samuel Whitbread proposed a new Poor Law. His scheme not only involved an increase in the financial help given to the poor, but the establishment of a free educational system. Whitbread proposed that every child between the ages of seven and fourteen who was unable to pay, should receive **two years' free education**. The measure was seen as too radical and was easily defeated in the House of Commons.

[www.rootsweb.com](http://www.rootsweb.com)

As the economy of Britain gradually changed from being based on agriculture, to being based on factories, there was a need for a better educated workforce. Factory workers needed to be able to perform tasks involving basic reading and writing.

British schools eventually changed to meet this demand and these changes flowed on to the Australian system in many ways. In the twentieth century, education became more and more accessible to poor people in Australia as well as in Britain.

Some still missed out on a decent education in the twentieth century, of course. In Queensland, these people were often:

- the very poorest,
- many Indigenous people,
- many new migrant groups,
- wards of the state,
- the disabled,
- the mentally ill,
- incarcerated children,
- gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students,
- many women,
- and some people in remote areas.

Often these groups were seen as “stupid” or inferior and not deserving of education. Sometimes they found work after receiving an inadequate education, or no education at all. Some of them led happy and productive lives, but a lot of the time, these people ended up in jail, or living in poverty with little hope for a better future. Partly because the education system failed them, they ended up as damaged people.

### “The New Knowledge Economy”

Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the needs of the international economy have changed once again. Schools are being forced to change to reflect this. In Australia, our modern ‘knowledge’ economy has jobs for people who are very good at reading, numeracy, and in computer skills. People skills (getting along with others) are also highly valued

in modern workplaces. So is abstract thinking and knowledge about the globalised world we live in.

Basically, in Australia (as well as in other rich countries) we are shifting from **an industrial economy** where there were jobs for *a lot of people* who had medium level literacy and numeracy skills, to a **knowledge economy** where there are jobs for *some people* with very highly developed skills.

There are still some unskilled jobs, like serving food and drink, answering phones, producing and picking fruit and vegetables, and so on. These are badly paid and usually have poor job security.

What is missing these days are the manufacturing jobs, like making clothes, or tools, or furniture, or other items in large factories. In the old industrial economy these jobs were normally done by the working class in Australia. In the new knowledge economy, a lot of these jobs have been ‘exported’ to poor countries where wage rates are far lower, and there are no unions to protect workers’ rights.

This means that the old option of dropping out of school early, and getting a job in a factory, is not as available as it used to be. Lots of those jobs aren’t there anymore. They are being performed by workers in India, China and other countries where there are no unions to protect wages, and people work for very low wages, or even no wages at all.

Unfortunately, many young Queenslanders don’t realise that the economy has changed. “Common sense” left over from the old industrial economy tells them that they can leave school and get jobs in the “real world”, just as their parents did in the 50s, 60s and 70s. But often, these jobs simply aren’t around.

### **3. What does this all mean?**

The effects of the new knowledge economy are many and varied. Schools will need to prepare children and young people for an world that will change rapidly in years to come. Young people who are at school today will need to be very flexible, know how to learn independently of schools and other ‘help’, and to have very diverse skills.

Students will need:

- to have very good reading, writing and numeracy skills
- to be computer-literate
- to be able to relate well to others in the workplace, without resorting to violence, bullying or harassment
- to be able to ‘learn on the job’
- to have ‘people skills’ to manage clients and colleagues
- to understand where their job fits into the ‘bigger picture’
- to understand how to work best within their organisation or industry
- to predict changes in their job, organisation or industry
- to cope emotionally with a more chaotic working life, with several changes of career likely for each person

The three 'Rs' of reading, writing and "rithmetic" (maths) are still necessary but they are far from enough on their own.

Queensland public schools are still asked to do this teaching in a one-teacher classroom of 30+ students. This one teacher will normally have about four years training for a job that is critically important to the society, the economy and to individual students. Public school teachers are paid a moderate amount of money to work in difficult conditions, with very high demands upon them.

#### **4. Who do schools work well for?**

Queensland schools work very well for about half the students who attend them (Gardner Report). This half of the school population will complete Grade Twelve with few problems, and won't need extra help to do so. They will leave school with good literacy and numeracy skills. They are likely to get into University or TAFE if they apply, and they will have some solid grounding in how to succeed in the Queensland economy and society.

This group of students are mostly from families that contain working adults. They are usually of non-Indigenous background, and have strong family support to achieve in school. They have parents who value education and who can see the long-term benefits of doing well in school. Their parents are likely to have completed Grade Twelve themselves, and may have post-school qualifications.

These students are probably not living with domestic violence, and are probably not from remote areas of the State. Girls (other than pregnant girls) do slightly better than boys overall, in Queensland schools.

So a "typical" young person who does well in Queensland schools is likely to be:

- of Anglo or established migrant background,
- is slightly more likely to be a girl,
- who is not living in poverty,
- whose parents value education,
- who comes from Brisbane or another major city,
- who is not living with domestic violence,
- who has stable accommodation,
- who is not living with mental illness,
- who is not otherwise disabled,
- who is not pregnant
- who is heterosexual,
- who is not living with family drug issues,
- and who has physical space and emotional support to complete homework and do well at school

#### **5. Who misses out?**

A 1990 report in Victoria found that the groups most at risk of leaving school early were Indigenous children, poor children, those based in the country, regular truants, and those with

low literacy and numeracy. (“Early School Leavers” Research Report No. 4, Melbourne University Institute of Education).

Other young people who have great difficulty in mainstream schools in Queensland include:

- those living with drug and alcohol issues
- those from violent family environments
- young people in institutions
- pregnant young women
- the children of refugees or recent migrants
- mentally ill or disabled students
- gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students

Many of these young people will leave school well before Grade Ten. Others might stay in school but as a result of struggling with racism, stigma, homophobia, drug issues or other problems, not achieve to their full potential. Mainstream schools usually struggle with their special needs.

“..many students who disengage from school-based learning do so in the **lower secondary school and even at the primary level**. The reasons for disengagement seem to be many and varied...but there is a pattern of behaviours and attitudes that sets in, quickly becomes entrenched, and endures. The case studies show that many students are alienated...to the extent that they cannot, or will not, contemplate a return to school as they experienced it.”

Pitman Report, p23 (emphasis added)

Reforms to education which only come into effect after Grade Ten will have little if any impact on children dropping out in years Eight and Nine.

## **6. So, what's ETRF?**

ETRF stands for “education and training reform for the future”. It is the government name for reforms to the education system in Queensland. It is a large scale set of complicated reforms. The main changes that are relevant to YANQ members are:

- changing the law so that young people **must stay at school** until they turn 17, *or* get a job, *or* finish a Certificate 3 training course, *or* achieve Grade Twelve *or* get an apprenticeship.
- Schools should take **more responsibility** for the young people in their care, including having to check where early school leavers end up. They should develop **plans for each individual student** about their studies from Grade Ten onwards. These are called ‘youth achievement plans’.
- Each region should develop a plan on how to help young people stay at school. These are called ‘**District Youth Achievement Plans**’. In some areas, there will be more than one.

- Schools will have access to **more community-based workers** called “youth support co-ordinators” who will support at-risk young people
- changing the way schooling is measured. The grade twelve certificate will count schoolwork, but also include other activities eg sporting achievement, work history, community leadership.
- Young people who do not attend school or training are likely to **lose their Youth Allowance payment from the federal government**

The Queensland government says it wants ETRF to do these things:

- To make sure all young people stay at school to complete grade twelve, (which might include TAFE or other training while still enrolled at school), OR
- Start an apprenticeship or traineeship, OR
- Enrol full-time in vocational education like TAFE, OR
- Start in higher education, OR
- Get a job

What ETRF means in practice is that young people legally have to be in school, work or in training until age 16 or 17, depending on what level of education they have achieved. Young people who don't attend school or training can have their Youth Allowance cut off, potentially leaving them in poverty with no income.

### **Trial Areas**

These education reforms are currently being tried out in seven ‘Trial Areas’ of Queensland. The contact people listed here work for Education Queensland, and have specific responsibilities for the areas listed.

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## **7. Does ETRF go far enough?**

The ETRF policy of the Queensland government is a recognition that schools are not working for many Queensland students. Students who are dropping out early, and leaving school without important skills, need extra help. YANQ supports much of the ETRF policy. But we believe that **many more alternative schools** are necessary for disadvantaged students. We also believe that disadvantaged students in remote and rural areas, especially those living with violence or poverty, need **better access to appropriate boarding schools**. Students of Non English Speaking Background need far better access to **ESL (English as a Second**

**Language) courses.** Queensland **school culture needs to be reformed** further, if all students are to perform to their best potential in a respectful, productive environment. We also believe that ETRF must be **funded adequately** if its to have any chance of succeeding.

### **Skills aren't Jobs**

YANQ members have expressed concerns that under ETRF students are simply being 'warehoused' in a variety of ways to keep them officially in the school system. Others have argued that providing *skills* is a very different thing to providing *jobs*.

“The system now isn't working obviously! I applaud the changes but worry about who the changes are fundamentally for. Are we just prolonging unemployment problem? There will be no extra jobs yet we are giving the kids an expectation that they will have them. How will their faith be in political and authority figures and social processes when this one fails them? Whose problem will it be when 17 year old school leavers are depressed and socially segregated when this collapses for them? Supply and demand! Are we creating an over supply for the same small demand?”

“This would make more sense if there was something concrete to link young people into post 17 years. We may have the most skilled unemployed workforce Australia has ever seen, nevertheless unemployed 15 or 17.”

Delegates, YANQ State conference 2003

Realistically, training does not create jobs. It can, however, create workers who are qualified to take up a wider range of existing jobs. It can also sometimes provide young people with skills and confidence to set up new businesses and organisations, and create employment in that way.

Training can also be seen as a valuable thing *in its own right*, regardless of whether or not jobs are created. Knowledge is power, and keeping young people in some form of training may increase their chances of continuing on with further education in the future.

### **Schools culture, past and present**

Most Queensland schools treat children with respect, to the best of their abilities. Most schools acknowledge, at least in theory, that children learn in different ways, that young people have rights, and that they come from diverse backgrounds. Most Queensland teachers have a genuine concern that the young people in their care get a proper education, and treat them as intelligent human beings.

Historically, though, some Queensland schools, and some teachers, have treated students badly, even viciously. Schools as we know them largely originated in the British system of workhouses. These were places that were much more like prisons than schools as we think of them. Inmates had almost no rights. Any misbehaviour in the workhouse could be punished by semi-starvation, or by physical punishment, or even jail.

These underlying attitudes are slow to die. Even though workhouses have not been used as places of education for many decades, their influence has lingered on in our schools. We are used to thinking of schools as places that **need** uniforms, regimentation, punishment and

hierarchies to work. This is a direct result of where schools came from (workhouses), and the society that schools used to reflect (Britain in centuries gone by).

“He (the headmaster) heard somebody laugh. He came storming into the classroom, grabbed these two little Grade Eight boys by the collar and dragged them into an empty room next door. We could hear him chasing them around the room with the cane. He is still teaching in south-east Queensland in a private school, in 2003.”

Teacher, 1980s, Brisbane southside

“I was made to stand in a rubbish bin all day at the back of the class because I was ‘a piece of rubbish.’”

Student, 1980s, Brisbane northside

“The headmaster bashed me in front of the school assembly.”

Indigenous girl, late 1980s, North Queensland

Unfortunately, some Queensland schools today continue to treat young people in ways that deny them their human rights, and create environments of fear, antipathy and distrust. In environments like this, young people will not perform to their full potential, and are much more likely to become early leavers or underachievers.

Some Queensland schools still struggle to recognise that young people have rights. Education is one of those rights. So are freedom of speech, and freedom of self-expression. Freedom from physical violence or sexual assault should be absolutely normal in a school setting. Unfortunately, this cannot be said of all Queensland schools.

Children who have backgrounds of family violence or who are marginalised in other ways, are not usually good at ‘putting up and shutting up’. The school culture of ‘fitting in’ and being compliant is simply impossible for many young people. This authoritarian type of system should not be inflicted on anyone, but for young people at risk, it is even more difficult to cope with.

Most young people come to school fed, clothed and loved by at least one adult. Marginalised young people may arrive at school hungry, homeless, confused and afraid, unable to speak English well, illiterate, feeling like society hates them, and possibly damaged by abuse from parents, step-parents, or other adults. It is wrong to blame such young people for failing to ‘fit in’ to an authoritarian system that cannot make allowances for their circumstances. There is another way! Alternative schools in southeast Queensland are showing us that schools can be democratic, not autocratic.

### **What are schools for?**

Schools are often seen by young people as boring, irrelevant or prison-like environments. We need to keep asking, *what are schools for?* Are they environments where children learn regimentation, that questioning authority is dangerous, and that the powerful are always right while the powerless are quashed? Or are they places for nurturing young people’s intelligence and ambition, so that they can go on to make a contribution to the society?

Are schools ‘warehouses’ to contain young Queenslanders until they are so old that they are simply uncontrollable, and then released onto the street? Or are they places where everyone is committed to a fair education, and where young people are helped, and feel valued and listened to?

Employing more youth support workers and adding flexibility by using TAFE are welcome changes to the education system. These positive aspects of ETRF, though, don’t change the fundamental nature of the Queensland schools culture, which is still based in authoritarian, top-down models of behaviour which takes little account of students’ rights, or of truly democratic practice.

Reforming school culture cannot be done without changing attitudes, changing structures, and injecting money to create lower class sizes. Some teachers, despite wanting to do better, find themselves using their authority harshly in order to control large groups of students. It is unreasonable and unrealistic to expect one adult to manage a group of over thirty students alone. **Class size** is a critical issue. So, however, are the **attitudes and behaviours** that are underpinning the school culture in Queensland. It is essential that children’s rights, as well as children’s responsibilities, are made a focus of schooling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Children and young people are not “the problem”. If a school is consistently not working for children and young people, the onus should be on the *school* to change. **Schools are for children and young people!**

YANQ believes that each public school in Queensland should establish a ‘**school steering committee**’ of young people, who have real powers and responsibilities to guide school policy and practice. This is an important step away from the ‘workhouse’ culture, and towards democratic schools for a democratic society.

## **8. The effect of raising the school leaving age**

YANQ members have expressed scepticism about raising the school leaving age. In practice, some young people will still leave early, regardless of the age put down in legislation as the ‘legal’ leaving age.

“Our education system can’t keep kids in school now. Fourteen and fifteen year olds are not in school and are on the street. How will we keep them in till sixteen?”

“I am worried about forcing our youth to stay in schooling system for an extra two years. I find this unproductive. It worries me that we are restricting our democratic rights at an even younger age.”

Delegates, YANQ State conference 2003

YANQ questions the value and relevance of making additional schooling compulsory, when at-risk youth are already struggling to complete ten years of compulsory mainstream schooling.

Cutting young people off Youth Allowance (a measure that will occur as a result of State and Federal government co-operation) for truancy has the potential to plunge young people into great poverty, and worsen their life chances. School or training for some disadvantaged young Queenslanders is simply too hard or too alien. Why should young people be punished for circumstances like mental illness, domestic violence or isolation? Cutting off Youth Allowance will have this negative and unnecessary effect on some disadvantaged youth.

## **9. Remote and rural students**

YANQ members in rural and remote areas have expressed concerns about problems in getting students into TAFE or alternative education.

“What will happen to the young people in rural areas when they live at least four hours drive from the nearest TAFE College?. What will happen to the young people if they do not attend school? What will be the teachers attitude to young people, are teachers going to be retrained and where will the jobs come from for these young people at the end of their schooling? Especially young people in rural communities?”

YANQ delegate, State conference

Once expelled or excluded from their local high school, students in much of Queensland have almost no other option to access education.

“I am concerned as to how young people from my area will access alternative education if the local community is unable to provide it. Our nearest TAFE is an hours drive away with no public transport! So where do the kids that don't fit into the 'School Model' go?”

YANQ delegate, State conference

“What to do with 14 year olds expelled from high school when there is only one school for 100 kilometres in either direction?”

YANQ delegate, State conference

**On-line education** might form part of the answer for these students. Many remote area students who drop out early, though, are close to illiterate when they leave school in Grades Eight or Nine (and problems reading and writing are a big part of why many students drop out). Their literacy and computing skills are poor, and this will be a substantial barrier to such students achieving. It is also very uncertain whether most of these students have physical access to reliable, networked computers, or the support they would need to undertake on-line courses.

Providing adequately funded **alternative education in remote areas** could be another important part of the solution. At present there is almost no off-school alternative schooling for young people in North or Western Queensland. Distance education fills part of this gap, but is not suitable for the very disadvantaged student who needs intensive support. Alternative schools have a proven record in south-east Queensland in meeting the needs of disadvantaged young people. They should be **expanded throughout the state**, in parallel with steps to improve mainstream school culture.

Improving access for late primary and early secondary students in remote areas to **appropriate boarding school facilities** could also be one way to keep such students in the education system. Many Indigenous students have historically done well in Queensland boarding schools.

“My sisters are jealous, because I was the one who got sent away and saved. I didn’t get what they copped, because I got to go to boarding school. And I’m the only one who works and isn’t drinking.”

Young Indigenous woman (1), Townsville

“At the boarding school they wouldn’t believe I had a fractured ankle and it was two days before it got treated. But overall, I’m glad I went to boarding school – it was safer than being at home.”

Indigenous woman (2), Townsville

## **10. Young People in Incarceration**

On an average day, there are usually about 100 young people under 18 incarcerated in Queensland prisons.

- about 50% will be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- about 80% will be male
- all incarcerated young women in Queensland will be held in Brisbane, at Wacol Youth Detention Centre
- some incarcerated young men will be held at Cleveland Youth Detention Centre in Townsville (the rest will be held in Brisbane)

Most of the young people who are locked up are early school-leavers or at very high risk of leaving early. Young people in incarceration have multiple complex needs. They are likely to suffer from many of the other risk factors for early school leaving, such as poverty, drug and alcohol issues, lack of family support etc. Most will have experienced great trauma in their lives, before being locked up.

Education Queensland provides a school for young people in the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre at Wacol. Courses in literacy, numeracy, drug and alcohol use, sex education and up to grade eleven maths and English are provided. A Certificate Four in Tertiary Preparation is available for those students able to apply for tertiary education.

“Most of them aren’t attending school when they get here, or they’ve been very transient. They go through an induction process, and get assessed for their education needs...When they do get out of here, they need a range of options. Like a couple of days normal school, a couple of days CDEP, and a day community service, something like that, so they don’t have to sit and try and concentrate for the five days - they just can’t handle it.”

Youth Detention educator, Brisbane

Some incarcerated young people are enrolled when they get out of detention into alternative schools in South East Queensland, an option which is **not available** elsewhere in the State. These schools include the Murri School, Boystown Kingston, Centre Education Kingston, and Albert Park Flexi-school, as well as others. These schools offer a smaller class size, teachers used to high-needs students, and a more relaxed environment. They are much more appropriate than mainstream schools for students who have been locked up.

A **linking process to the alternative schools** could help young people who are locked up. The detention centre could allow one or more visits to the alternative school, **before release** of the young person. This could allow the young person time to get used to the idea of the alternative school, and give them some future direction to plan for while they serve their time. Experiencing a new environment when first released from detention is stressful for an already highly stressed young person. Some prior knowledge of and contact with the school setting would help the transition.

More alternative schools are urgently needed to support these high-risk, high-need students. In particular, **true alternative schools are critically needed in North and West Queensland.**

## **11. Indigenous students**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students face special challenges within mainstream education systems, as in society generally.

“Two groups of young people have been identified as being more vulnerable than others to the dangers of truancy and exclusion from school. These are children in care, whether temporary or long term, including those living in shelters, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.” (Truancy and Exclusion from School, House of Reps standing committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1996)

Some of these challenges arise because Indigenous students are more likely to be living in poverty, with family violence, or with drug and alcohol issues. Other challenges are based on racism, and the culture of mainstream schooling.

Another issue specific to Indigenous students is that their **parents or carers** are very likely to have had **negative experiences in Queensland schools**. (Many Aboriginal students in the past were denied access to schools, but some did get to go to school). In the past, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people went to school, only to be taught that their people were “heathens and savages” who deserved to be “discovered” by Captain Cook, and “civilised” by the British. Indigenous culture was generally despised, and Indigenous people were regarded as “primitive”.

Because you were black they didn't want to be seated next to you, they didn't want to touch you...when we did folk dancing you had to hang onto a stick they were holding, not their hand. They didn't want to get your 'germs'.

Aboriginal parent, Western Queensland

As in the wider society, schools often contained students and teachers who were actively racist towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In the past, Indigenous students were widely regarded by others as “stupid”, “lazy” or “useless”. Fear of authority was great, since if Indigenous people protested about this racism, the government was able to come and take their children away.

Most Queensland schools have improved in the past decade or two. Overt racism towards Indigenous students is less tolerated than it used to be. Most Indigenous parents today recognise the value of education for their children, and encourage their children to succeed in mainstream schools despite the obstacles facing them. Some Indigenous parents, though, still see little value in sending their children to schools where they experienced **great pain** themselves. Some Indigenous parents see truancy not as a negative thing, but simply as a way of children protecting themselves from hostile and racist environments.

“I was told by my teacher that I couldn’t do Grade Twelve, because I was Aboriginal, and Aboriginals were stupid.”

Brisbane community leader and academic, 1970s

“What are schools for? To make kids feel shame and humiliation.”

Aboriginal parent, Brisbane, 2003

### Indigenous students within the Mainstream System

Some Indigenous students are **succeeding** within Queensland schools, despite the challenges they face as a disadvantaged minority group. Not all Indigenous students are at-risk of early leaving, and some have achieved outstanding results. For many Indigenous students, Queensland schools have **the capacity to work**. More resources need to be allocated to ensure the success of these students, and the Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff who work with them.

**YANQ believes that comprehensive cross-cultural training, delivered by skilled Indigenous (and NESB) people, should be made compulsory for all staff in Queensland schools.**

The employment of **many more Indigenous staff**, both teachers and para-professionals, for all Queensland schools should be made a high priority of Education Queensland. Culturally appropriate training and professional development of these staff should also be supported.

### Indigenous Students in Alternative Education

For the most disadvantaged Indigenous students, issues of poverty, violence, racism and cultural difference will mean that mainstream schools are usually very inappropriate places for them to learn. There is a desperate need for **alternative schools** in North and Western Queensland for these students.

At best, alternative schools would be **Indigenous-controlled independent schools** where Indigenous culture is understood, valued and practised by both students and staff. The Brisbane Aboriginal and Islander Community School (“the Murri School”) is one such

alternative, where Indigenous (and other) students are achieving literacy rates *better* than in Queensland State schools. With the solid educational grounding that these alternative schools can provide, disadvantaged Indigenous students are far more likely to succeed in mainstream Australian society. Such schools promote a more harmonious society by **improving the life chances** of Indigenous and other children.

Where Indigenous controlled Independent schools are not yet available, **other alternative schools** may provide support for disadvantaged Indigenous students. Schools like Southside Education, while not Indigenous-run, are usually more culturally appropriate and flexible for Indigenous students than mainstream schools.

The use of **appropriate boarding school facilities** should also be subsidised for disadvantaged Indigenous students from remote areas, especially where these students are living with poverty or violence.

“Boarding school was the first place I’d ever been where it was alright that I didn’t drink, didn’t smoke, didn’t have sex. I loved it.”

Indigenous woman, Mt Isa

Without such alternatives, the most disadvantaged Indigenous students will continue to struggle within a culturally alien environment, and be over-represented in early school leaver numbers.

## **12. NESB students**

Students of Non English Speaking Background can have very positive experiences in Queensland schools, and many achieve to a very high standard. Not all NESB students are disadvantaged by their cultural or linguistic background. However, many students, especially those who are refugees or recent migrants, will struggle.

**Lack of access to English as a Second Language (ESL) training at an appropriate time and venue is a critical issue for NESB students.** Without good English, students will have enormous difficulty with schoolwork, with taking part in Australian life generally, and with dealing with authority figures like teachers or government departments. ESL classes need to be made available to NESB young people in places and at times when they are accessible. English is a **basic requirement** to function well in Queensland schools – it is not “optional” for NESB students, and more effort and funding is urgently needed in this area.

There is also a general lack of understanding by schools, teachers and other students of NESB student’s **personal and community histories**. Some NESB students are living with the aftermath of torture, trauma and other refugee-related issues.

“I had a Vietnamese friend who told me about being hidden in a box on board their boat, as a child, while she heard her aunt being raped and murdered by pirates.”

NESB High school student, Brisbane, 1990s

Many NESB students have migrated to Australia to escape persecution or great poverty in their home country. Some students will have been tortured, bashed, raped, or seen their family

killed. Some students will be ‘unaccompanied minors’ – that is, they have no family in Australia to support them, and must be totally self-reliant. A percentage of NESB students will experience panic attacks, or display aggressive or abnormal behaviour, due to post-traumatic stress disorder.

It is unrealistic to expect all teachers to understand the cultural backgrounds of every NESB (or Indigenous) student. **Effective training**, though, can help teachers to avoid the worst errors in teaching across cultures. Students also need support and education around issues of race and culture, since prejudice can as easily come from other students as from teachers or administrators.

“It can be very difficult for some of them, like the African kids, to see other people kissing and hugging in public, because they just don’t do that and aren’t used to it. It’s shocking to them.”

Youth worker, Logan

**YANQ believes that comprehensive cross-cultural training, delivered by skilled Indigenous (and NESB) people, should be made compulsory for all staff in Queensland schools.**

Some young refugees in Queensland schools are living with the immense stress of not knowing if their Temporary Protection Visa is going to be renewed, or **if they will be deported** by the Federal Government back to their country of origin. This places enormous stress upon the young person. While this isn’t a matter that can be addressed by the Queensland government, it has implications for the needs of the young people. Another important issue is the **poverty** that those on Temporary Protection Visas experience. These young people can only rely on the wider community. There is no social security support whatsoever for them or their families, and due to Federal Government policy they are forced to rely on charity for their housing, food, and all other needs.

For young NESB people from established migrant communities, there are issues to do with developing a workable **bicultural identity** (esp 2<sup>nd</sup> and third generation migrants). These young NESB people may not speak their parents or grandparent’s language, and may experience identity confusion. This in turn can lead to depression, aggression or self-harming behaviour.

The Queensland schools curricula has an **historical British bias**. Students in Queensland schools are often assumed to be white Christians of European background and this emphasis flows throughout the entire system. (eg school texts only in English; notes only sent home in English; very few bilingual teachers; insufficient ESL support; a school culture that regards white Europeans as ‘normal’ and others as ‘different’). This bias can lead to further alienation of NESB students. In particular, students report that they dislike being expected to be “the experts” on their family’s culture, and to “explain” their culture to other students. This is especially problematic for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation NESB young people, who may not be well-connected to their communities of ethnic origin. For other NESB young people, it may be too difficult or traumatic to speak about their ethnic or cultural background to outsiders, yet since teachers are highly respected in most NESB cultures, they feel under enormous pressure to do so if asked.

Teachers and other students from NESB communities can help to support NESB students in our schools. There is a need, though, for **specialised NESB support workers in Queensland schools** who are trained and available when NESB students need help.

### **13. Other Disadvantaged Students**

A wide range of students other than remote area; Indigenous; NESB and young people in incarceration have trouble in Queensland schools. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully address the special needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students, or of disabled and mentally ill students, or of impoverished students.

YANQ acknowledges that these young people also experience various forms of **discrimination and hardship** within schools. All young people deserve the support they need to successfully complete Grade Twelve. These students are no exception.

The categories of students who struggle at school do not 'cancel each other out'. That is, some young people locked up in Queensland will be both Indigenous and disabled. Some NESB young people will also have a disability. Some gay students will be from remote areas and so on. The categories are not distinct.

What is required, apart from **adequate funding** of programs addressing special needs, is cultural change in Queensland schools. Instead of schools being shaped to fit the mythical "mainstream" with all other young people falling outside the box, schools should recognise from the outset that they need to **cater to diversity as a normal part of their everyday business.**

About eighteen per cent of the Queensland population has a disability.

About ten per cent of the Queensland population is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

About three per cent of the Queensland population is Indigenous.

About eight per cent of the Queensland population is from a NESB community.

About twenty per cent of the Queensland population lives in rural or remote areas.

About twenty one per cent of the Queensland population lives below the Henderson poverty line.

**That adds up to 79% of the Queensland population!!**

There is a lot of overlap in these categories. (Half of the Indigenous population lives in rural or remote areas, for example, and much of the disabled population will live in poverty). But these statistics clearly show if Queensland schools only focus on educating the so-called "mainstream" student, a huge number of young people will **miss out**. In the past, most disadvantaged students did have to simply miss out. Today, we recognise that a fair and democratic society will create schools that work for all young people, not just some young people.

'Special needs' must be recognised and accommodated. **But 'special needs' are really normal needs, of normal students in a diverse society.** In every community in Queensland, there are young people with disabilities, young Indigenous people, young GLBT people, young NESB people, and young people from a rural or remote background, and young people who have been incarcerated. And just because you might not know about them, doesn't mean they aren't there!

One of the reasons alternative schools have been so successful in southeast Queensland, is because they are small enough and flexible enough to cater to much of this diversity in the population.

## **14. Alternative Schools**

Our schools originally started in British institutions like workhouses or the Church, which were far from democratic. The basic law of these institutions was that those at the top gave out orders, which were followed slavishly by those below. Punishments for disobedience were harsh, arbitrary and unfair. You had to fit in, or you suffered. This model fits badly with Australia's modern democratic values.

“The principle of providing education and training for all young people in a variety of settings is great. I am concerned that the education system will not be able to change its programs/curricula let alone the attitude of teachers and administrators to genuinely support young people who choose a pathway that is not the traditional options.”

YANQ delegate, State conference

There is an alternative to schools which operate in a ‘top-down’ inflexible authoritarian manner. Schools can be run on a **more democratic basis**, where young people share power with adults, have real responsibilities, and are listened to and respected. Many alternative schools run successfully in just that way, today in southeast Queensland. Where young people assert their rights, there is simply no other way. Queensland students need, and deserve, more alternative schools, particularly in North and West Queensland where students are likely to be poor, Indigenous and have great difficulty with mainstream educational structures. The problems in these areas are not the students, but the *education systems* we are expecting them to fit into.

“I'd like to see real implementation of Pitman and Gardners recommendations. The school setting is not servicing a large number of our young people. Look outside the box you work in Education Queensland. Not just lip service. Support successful alternatives.”

“I would like to see Alternative Education - the TAFE system is not alternative education. Lets see some education, not training to suit employers needs.”

Delegate, YANQ State Conference 2003

For those unused to thinking outside traditional structures, the idea of widespread alternative education might seem unlikely, or unworkable. But in the past, the idea of women having power seemed equally unlikely. It was once thought that slavery was absolutely necessary for the prosperity of Europe and the USA. Ideas about what is ‘normal’ and ‘necessary’ can often be proved wrong. Democracy has always been a struggle for those demanding that their rights be recognised.

Traditional schools are **not working** for significant numbers of Queensland young people. Alternative schools are a proven way of keeping at-risk young people engaged in education,

and in touch with their communities. Some alternative schools, such as the Murri School in Brisbane, and Southside Education in Sunnybank, are achieving outstanding academic results with disadvantaged students. All that is needed is for real attention to be paid to **the needs of disadvantaged young people**, rather than the existing school systems that adults are comfortable with. *Young people are not the “problem” – inflexible and outdated school systems are!*

## **14. Suspension and exclusion**

Queensland principals have the power to exclude or expel young people from their schools. Some disadvantaged young people have also reported that they experience pressure to leave the school system voluntarily. (Eg, sometimes principals suggest to young people that other schools might be ‘more suitable’ for them). At-risk young people are thereby given a clear message that school is not for them, and they are unwanted and unwelcome. Some young people end up leaving the school system when they have the right to remain within it, and continue their education.

Young people’s rights to natural justice should be recognised in the case of expulsion or exclusion. In particular, students should be **kept informed of the process** to be followed in exclusion or expulsion. They should also be given **enough time** to prepare themselves for meetings where these matters are going to be decided. They should always have **a parent or responsible adult present** when these matters are decided, and should be informed of their **rights to appeal** the decision.

I have just learned that penalties will apply to young people...further perpetuating the ‘prison-like’ environment of schools which young people identify schools.  
Increase options for young people – do not increase punishments...

Delegate, YANQ State conference 2003

**Community representation** and **student representation** on panels which exclude or expel students should be made compulsory, as should the protection of **natural justice** for students.

## **15. “Show us the money”**

The attitudes, curricula and theories which educated Queensland in the 1900s will not serve us well today. YANQ believes that the culture of Queensland schools needs to change to reflect an increasingly democratic society.

“I commend the government for having the vision and guts to reform Education and Training and sincerely urge government to commit sufficient time and funds and ‘listening’ to make it work for young people and whole community.

YANQ member, State conference

Schools also need to adapt to the very diverse student population, and diverse society, they are now rightly expected to serve. The majority of Queensland State schools try hard to be inclusive, and are aware of the need to be respectful of their student’s intelligence and

potential. Large class sizes and lack of resources, though, make the difficult job of teaching even more difficult.

ETRF should be funded to a realistic level which allows for the full implementation of the policy. **Adequate funding will at least allow the *possibility* of real change in Queensland schools.** Without adequate funding, Queensland schools will continue to struggle. Democratic process will suffer, teachers will continue to be burnt out, and many students' life chances will be very much poorer as a result. There is an alternative to this scenario but it requires that the Queensland Government makes some difficult decisions about realistic levels of funding for education in the "Smart State".

## Recommendations

1. The urgent establishment and adequate funding of several off-campus **true alternative schools in North Queensland** and at least one in south-western Queensland
2. The facilitation of **Indigenous-controlled independent schools** in North and West Queensland (open to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, as at the Brisbane Independent Aboriginal and Islander School)
3. Better access, including subsidised fees, to **appropriate boarding schools** for disadvantaged remote area students living with poverty or violence
4. Additional funding for **literacy and numeracy support** within State schools for NESB students, during hours when students can access it easily.
5. **Compulsory cross-cultural training** for all schools staff, regarding Indigenous and NESB issues
6. Employment of **specialised, trained support staff for NESB** students in all schools with more than a negligible NESB student population
7. Incorporation of **principles of natural justice** in exclusions/suspensions and inclusion of community members and student members in panels to hear these
8. Establishment of a **visiting program** between alternative schools and young incarcerated people in Queensland
9. Breaking of the nexus between school/training attendance and eligibility for Youth Allowance
10. Lobbying of the Commonwealth for extra funding to **lower class sizes**
11. Lobbying of the Commonwealth for extra funding to employ more trained and para-professional staff skilled in working with **disabled and mentally ill students**
12. Increased democratisation of school culture through the establishment of **student representative bodies** within schools which have real powers and responsibilities to affect school policy and practices
13. The promotion of **'lifelong learning'** as a social norm in Queensland
14. The promotion of **meeting 'diverse' needs** as a normal part of everyday schools business in every school catchment area.

## Sources

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- *The Senior Certificate: A New Deal*, Pitman, 2002
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- *Under Age School Leaving*, National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, 1997 National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, Hobart
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- *School Exclusions: student perspectives on the process*, National Children's and Youth Law Centre, UNSW, Sydney 1995

And from talking to a wide variety of young people, YANQ members, youth workers and educators throughout the state.