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**THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS
MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, HOBART ON
THURSDAY 5 FEBRUARY 2026.**

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR TASMANIAN SENIOR SECONDARY STUDENTS

CHAIR - Thanks, Minister, for appearing before the Public Accounts Committee. This is our follow-up inquiry into the Auditor-General's report that was done in 2022, 'Improving outcomes for Tasmanian senior secondary students'. I was at the Hellyer College awards nights the other night and my word, they're doing some nice things there.

Ms PALMER - Yes, pretty amazing.

CHAIR - A little plug for Hellyer College there, shamelessly.

Minister, we appreciate you providing a response to the Committee. This is an opportunity to further explore your and the Department's response to the recommendations made by the Auditor-General. I will ask you to introduce the members of your team at the table and for them to take the statutory declaration, then I invite you to make any opening comments you wish.

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much for that, Chair. I'd like to introduce the Secretary of DECYP, Ginna Webster; and also our Deputy Secretary for Strategy and Performance, Jenny Burgess.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to make some opening comments. Can I first say happy day one, Term 1 2026, to all of our little learners, including 4,000 kindergarten children who started in our State Government schools this morning. We hope they had a great day.

It is really good to have the opportunity to make an opening statement about how this Government is focusing on improving senior secondary outcomes with concentrated effort through a fit-for-approach to project management, governance and stakeholder engagement.

The independent education review gave us a really honest picture of where we are and a clear road map for where we need to go. A key theme of the review was defining educational success. It found the absence of a shared definition in Tasmania meant that success had been narrowly understood through traditional measures of formal attainment. This has meant that many students could not actually see themselves reflected in the prevailing narrative of success. By extension, that means what we have been measuring is too narrow and doesn't give us a complete picture of what success looks like. We need to change that and we are changing that.

A foundational response to recommendation 1 has been working together to develop a shared and inclusive Tasmanian definition of educational success. Through the review, young people clearly told us that success is broader than their grades alone. It's about developing life and social skills, having real choices for the future, growing as individuals, achieving personal goals and contributing meaningfully to their communities. Those voices are shaping the definition, which is being developed collaboratively with other education sectors and key

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stakeholders, including our unions, the Tasmanian Association of State School Organisations (TASSO) and the Tasmanian Principals Association (TPA), and we are very close.

For me, this matters deeply. A shared definition gives our system a common purpose and young people a clear sense that success can look different for different learners and that their aspirations matter. A shared definition of educational success will enable us to focus on what we need to do to ensure learners can achieve success under that definition and look at what it means for curriculum and ensure the TCE remains fit for purpose.

While this work has been progressing, our school sectors have also been working together on areas of improvement identified in the Auditor-General's report. Of the seven recommendations, six have been fully implemented and one partially implemented. Significant work has been undertaken to address recommendations and that's including: the establishment of a project management office to provide project support across DECYP; the implementation of a specific approach to project management, and that includes project initiation and good governance practices with clear roles and responsibilities identified at the outset; and a focus on short, medium, and long-term project implementation approaches.

Chair, thank you for the opportunity to have us here today and we're happy to take any questions.

CHAIR - Thank you. Minister, our unusual approach has been to go through the recommendations one by one, acknowledging that they do overlap -

Mr JAENSCH - Chair, don't we need to swear in the officials?

CHAIR - Oh, sorry, we haven't done it. Thank you, Roger.

Ms PALMER - I think I skipped that.

CHAIR - Attention to detail. I thought we did it earlier.

Ms GINNA MARIA WEBSTER, SECRETARY, AND **Ms JENNY LOUISE BURGESS**, DEPUTY SECRETARY STRATEGY & PERFORMANCE, DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE, WERE CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

CHAIR - Generally, we will work through the recommendations in order, and there may be some discussion that crosses over. You've touched on the principle that guides all of this. You've provided a response to the recommendation that you say is accepted in full, but it is pretty scant. Would you like to add more directly to Recommendation one?

Ms PALMER - Certainly. Of course, that's referring to project initiation planning. DECYP has implemented a structured system-wide approach to project initiation, and this means reforms are clearly defined from the outset and there is that shared understanding of purpose, scope and intended outcomes. This work aligns very closely with the independent education review principles by strengthening early planning to ensure that reforms deliver the best outcomes for children and young people.

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The project management office, which we refer to as the PMO, was established in 2022, and, following integration into whole-of-agency policy services in early 2025, continues to support all major reforms with standardised initiation requirements. To talk you through some more details, also including templates and guidelines, I will pass to the Department.

Ms WEBSTER - The project management office was established in 2022. We used internal resourcing for that PMO.¹ It's now integrated within a whole-of-agency policy services within the strategy and performance portfolio. It has really improved our project management capability. It's intended to be a whole-of-agency approach.

As the Minister said, we have templates and guidance there for all agency projects, not necessarily just within the education sphere or this particular focus of the Auditor-General's report. What we have done really is provide oversight to whether the projects are low, small, medium or high, large projects. There's the opportunity to adjust the templates and the guidelines according to the particular project.

Depending on the project and this might go to future recommendations, but we do have a strong governance approach on those projects. If the project is a long-term, high-profile, significant project, we would have governance of that over a steering committee that would also include external resourcing for that governance arrangement.

CHAIR - How does this change from what was happening previously?

Ms WEBSTER - I might ask Ms Burgess to do that, given that she was there at that time.

Ms BURGESS - During that time, back when this was being undertaken, we had a more dispersed approach to this rather than a centralised coordinated approach. Within the portfolios at that point in time, while there was project management staff and expertise working in that, we didn't have a centralised coordination approach to the initiation phases, to the documentation, to the evaluation, to all of those phases of project management. We were probably more reliant on the individual skill-sets people brought to the table. We saw the gap in that and realised, of course, we needed to have a more centralised approach. Then with the coming together of the two agencies, it was again time to consolidate that and make sure there was consistent practise across all of the portfolios.

CHAIR - Minister, the project management office oversees projects related to infrastructure as well as soft infrastructure. Can you provide a bit more description of how it actually works in that?

Ms BURGESS - Within the agency, we have really well-established project management approaches, particularly in the information technology and systems area as well as the infrastructure, the facilities area. Those two teams have well-established skill-sets and approaches and processes, slightly nuanced for the area they're working in. This project management approach goes to more the policy strategy areas of project management, so that softer side rather than that more infrastructure technology side.

¹ Project Management Office

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CHAIR - So that said, the policy and strategy, it can't be in a silo from infrastructure or ICT or those sort of things. How do you ensure that you don't provide - we don't end up with a siloed approach, even though the system might be - that part might be fine?

Ms WEBSTER - The first thing I'd say is that one of the things that project management officers established is that the template for clarity, role definition, governance, initiation - it really is a guide for all those other areas to go to make sure that there is that consistent approach. One of the other things that the Department has are, what we would call 'plans on a page', and that really governs a plan that we would apply for all projects regardless of whether they're infrastructure or those other IT projects or policy projects.

To give you an example, we've got the 57 plans on a page to support project initiation and planning for the Commission of Inquiry. We have 204 plans on a page to support school based project and reform. They really are the guiding principles and that ensures - because each project is slightly different. Obviously, infrastructure you'd bring in, obviously, different stakeholders, there's a different project budget, there's a different approach, IT. Then you've got those smaller policy projects where you do want to ensure they've got a strong communication plan with stakeholders. The project management office that was established provides the guidance for those areas. It doesn't do the work, but it provides the guidance for that.

Ms BURGESS - If I might just add on to the Secretary's comments. In addition to that, we've got well-established governance, so the governance and the ways of working through that governance play a particularly key role.

If I use an example to build the understanding, in the area of student systems and student system support we're giving some consideration to what that might look like going forward. Now, while that's a systems - that might be a solution, the work actually is around the strategy and the policy. The governance provides the bridge between that IT approach to work and actually what's required on the ground in the operational level of, let's say, schooling and then what's the policy work that needs to be done to ensure that the system is responding to the contemporary needs of schooling and the policy environment.

There's joined-up governance in that space, and I think what you'd find in that one in particular is that all deputy secretaries that are working or have relevance in that space are all part of the discussions around the data and the systems through a governance-based approach.

CHAIR - Have you done anything, Minister, or are you satisfied that the outcomes being achieved are better and that there - and there's always room for improvement in all things. I'm not saying, you tick a box, that's all done. That's exactly not what I'm saying. But how do you measure the outcomes of this implantation of this recommendation and the project management office in that space?

Ms PALMER - I think one of the great indicators is when you're getting feedback from staff who are sort of saying we have such greater clarity now. We have improved confidence in our project planning, the roles and the responsibilities and the governance are now really defined. I think that that's been really good to be getting that feedback back. Also it's in the delivery of projects. That's where we look to see how these changes and the implementation of this work makes a difference. But it is good to get that feedback from staff.

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Ms WEBSTER - To give an example of that would be the Lifting Literacy Outcomes Monitoring Group, for example. As the Minister mentioned, the independent education review specifically said that the Lifting Literacy initiative and project that the Department has undertaken is really starting to take hold and see success, and we should stay the course with that. But to make sure that we're on the right track and those outcomes are being monitored, the Lifting Literacy Outcomes Monitoring Group does exactly that. That's independently chaired, it sits within the Department of Premier and Cabinet, so there are also those oversight mechanisms -

CHAIR - That weren't there before.

Ms WEBSTER - That weren't there before. I think depending on the size of the project, we would then - evaluation is a really strong part of each project finalisation. Certainly my observation of the Department and what I've seen and been involved in is that that process doesn't wait until the end of the project. Projects now start at the beginning to say how are we going to monitor and evaluate the project. I think the Department has a very strong track record of external evaluation and monitoring. I think that probably did come out of this approach, but that's obviously improving over time. I think it does very much depend on the size of the project. I'm not sure if there's anything the Deputy Secretary wants to add.

Mr EDMUNDS - Thanks for that example because that's what I was going to ask about. You talked about the success of implementation of point one, and I was going to ask for some - because you talk about policies and yada, yada, yada. Actual things we can look at - so you've talked about Lifting Literacy, are there other projects you can perhaps reference how the recommendations made have been implemented and that you've found successful?

Ms PALMER - Yeah, I think we certainly can. In the evaluation space with the policy and reform pace around multi-school organisations. From even before the Multi-School Organisation trial officially got underway - working on what does the evaluation look like, how does that need to roll out - that's something that was in the planning months before.

It's really been quite serious about the evaluation side of things. That is part of a project day one. It's not something that we get halfway through a project and go, 'Oh, we probably should start evaluating this'. In the time that I've been with the Department, that's been really great to see that in in the reforms and in some of the policy spaces. The Secretary and the Deputy Secretary might have other examples.

Ms WEBSTER - I was going to mention the multi school organisation and we're currently - we are also rolling out, today, day one of the groupings of schools as well. We're currently going through a process of looking at how we evaluate that model, too. The Department collects a lot of data, so it has a really good starting point - I think to say we already collect the data baseline data. What do we need to gain out of that data and what's the analysis we can gain from it?

I think internally too, there's a lot of internal committees on school improvement, obviously, standard work, health and safety, those sorts of things - but there are specific committees and roles that are focused on school improvement in particular and those sorts of things. There is a lot of internal evaluation, but also that external evaluation as well. I'm not sure if the Deputy Secretary wants to add an example.

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Ms BURGESS - I could give another example for you. So the Independent Education Review, or the independent review of education - I think we call it different acronyms. For example, as you would be aware that the report was handed down in January [2025] last year. It makes a number of recommendations. In response to that, from a project management perspective, we've done a number of things. Each of those recommendations has a senior accountable officer and a sponsor who is held accountable through various processes and through their performance development to ensure that they deliver on that.

From there, it's really clear about what the initiation documentation needs to look like, the accountabilities and the clearance processes through the governance structure. Some might go through a learner in school improvement governance structure up to the executive leadership team. In addition, there is public accountable reporting annually and we report quarterly to the Minister on progress reports, and so all of those feed into that.

Within each of the projects there is obviously the project management approach being undertaken so there's one there for recommendation 1, around defining success. All of that documentation is there what the outcome is that we're seeking to achieve and then how that will be developed, consulted on, evaluated, implemented, refined, et cetera.

CHAIR - When is it expected that it will be implemented? Defining success of the shared definition, you said - you sort of indicated it hasn't quite got there yet?

Ms PALMER - Yeah. It's one of the things that Vicki Baylis, who did that amazing body of work - she's one of Australia's great educators, came to us from the Northern Territory. One of the things she said is that that's actually going to be the hardest recommendation because that's about looking at culture.

There are so many voices in that space that we needed to listen to and perhaps most importantly, it was the voice of students. Through her work with the review she conducted hundreds of visits and engagements with school children of all different ages and was able to really hear their voice about what they see as educational success. As soon as the review came out, I asked the Secretary to talk to ACE, which is head of Catholic Education, head of our independent schools and of course our Secretary is head of our Government schools, to look at that recommendation and to come back to me with their thoughts around what educational success looks like.

We've been able to combine all of these bodies of work and all of these voices and I would say we are very, very close to actually bringing out what is that definition of educational success, how do the heads of all of our schools view it, how did our children view it, how do our teachers view it and what do our families say educational success is? What makes a family go, 'I see this in my child?'

CHAIR - How will you measure it? Will that be part of it? You have a definition, but it's important to deliver against that.

Ms PALMER - Yes, this is going to be a really big body of work but it had to start with that definition because it's from there that we will be held accountable and where that will actually shape how we collect data, how we report on the achievements of our children and young people. I don't know if the Secretary wants to add to that.

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Ms WEBSTER - As the Minister said, we have the Education Advisory Council, the Heads of Education, looking at that and coming back to work that has already been done. We've certainly started on that immediately, but that has been a pretty big consultation piece because of the voice of the children and also it is across the three sectors, so that will come back to the Education Advisory Council and then we're working together to embed that definition and also the planning is underway to look at how we evaluate that. Echoing what the Minister said, it's a fairly complex piece of work. I'm not sure if the Deputy Secretary wants to add anything.

Mr WINTER - When will that be completed?

Ms PALMER - I believe we're going to have that definition in a matter of weeks. Yeah, in a matter of weeks. Once we have that definition which had to be that first piece of work, a program of work will be triggered from that definition and that will be looking at our whole approach to senior secondary accreditation and delivery. We will be looking at things like reviewing our Tasmanian Certificate of Education to determine whether it's fit for purpose, including what we measure as part of this certification and also considering what we deliver, how we deliver it and where we deliver it, so that definition of what is success will be a guidepost for us in how we move forward.

CHAIR - We will move to Recommendation 2.

Mr WINTER - What time are we finishing, Chair?

CHAIR - We are finishing at 3:45 pm.

Mr WINTER - Great. I just want to make sure we get through. I have one for number 5.

CHAIR - Okay.

Mr WINTER - We are only on number 2, Chair.

CHAIR - We've covered a lot of headlines and stuff anyway. Minister, do you want to add further to Recommendation 2's response? It's quite brief.

Ms PALMER - Yes, but I will answer any question that you put to me. We do want to make sure you come away from this with the answers that you need. This is, obviously, looking at communication planning. The Department now embeds communication planning into all major reforms and the Deputy Secretary has touched on this with the previous recommendation. This provides a shared understanding of intent, terminology and expected outcomes across stakeholders and, again, looking at the Independent Education Review where there was a focus on clarity and transparency and shared understanding with communities.

Community planning now occurs early and making sure that reforms are understood before implementation. I don't know if the Secretary would like to add anything to that or if you have any other questions on this one, Chair?

Ms WEBSTER - I think, as the Minister said, our aim is to make sure that we communicate earlier and have really clear messaging around projects and initiation stage. I think we'd always want to communicate a lot better. It's one of those things in a - we are out of 24/7 Department and, obviously, you know, taking into consideration the work of schools.

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And there's a lot to get through in a day for a principal. There's a lot to get through if you're a child safety worker or a youth justice worker as well. We want to make sure that we have a process to hit our communication in the right way at the right time. I think we would say that is still very much evolving around early communication, including with key stakeholders that are outside the agency, within -

CHAIR - That was my next question. In terms of identifying and then engaging with the key stakeholders, and obviously it depends somewhat on the project you're looking at. But how is that determined?

Ms WEBSTER - Again, it depends on the project. If I can give an example of what we're doing, we have two workforce roundtables at the moment, one Education and one Child Safety and Youth Justice roundtable. The Education roundtable, we have all the key stakeholders invited and attending those roundtables.

CHAIR - How do you identify them? Have you got a list? Is it a standard list?

Ms WEBSTER - Yes, absolutely. It's a standard list that would be added to, depending on the project. For Education, the standard list would be, of course, our staff, our unions, the schools association, principals association -

CHAIR - Other Departments?

Ms WEBSTER - Other Departments. It just depends. We would have a standard list. It also depends on the community, very much place-based, and our school associations in the Education space are very key part of that. If it was another area of the Department, it could include police, those sorts of things. We have a standard list that we would then workshop at the initiation phase.

CHAIR - I don't think you mentioned students.

Ms WEBSTER - No, that was an oversight. It wasn't that we don't consider them. It was just a list that I wasn't necessarily reading from. But absolutely.

Ms PALMER - It even expands to local councils. If there's something happening in an area, then it's making sure you're engaging with the local councillors and what have you. It's as granular as we sit down literally with a page and go, 'Okay, Minister needs to contact, Secretary needs to contact. This can be an email. This needs to be a workshop'. We really look at the resources across the Department and across the Minister's office and say, 'Okay, who needs to be talking to who and what's the best way of communicating?' Because sometimes it is an email but sometimes it is picking up the phone and having a conversation. We look at what each project might actually require. There's not a one-size-fits-all.

CHAIR - One of the key problems, and I think you touched on it, Ginna, was that not-good communication leads to all sorts of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the intent. The way I read the intent of this recommendation is that there needs to be consistent messaging, clear messaging, repetitive messaging, and that sort of thing. In terms of the communication planning, you've talked about a sort of a system and that, but have you got a planning document that has all these things listed? Can you provide a copy of that?

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Ms BURGESS - The communication planning document? Yes.

CHAIR - Yes, it might be helpful to have that because I think that would outline a lot of this and probably have students included.

Ms WEBSTER - We also have our regular student surveys through the year as well, and there's an opportunity to engage separately.

I think the other thing, though, picking up your point around the voice of the student and the voice of the young person sort of from a general perspective, we do have a child advocate who we can engage with around a range of things. We engage with other organisations to make sure that we can get the voice of the child included, as well as our schools and our survey. There's a number of steering committees or roundtables that I'm involved in where there are students or lived-experience people on those panels as well.

Ms PALMER - Our Youth Advisory Council as well, which is another great way to be able to take a scenario to a group of children who are from right across the state, from all different parts of Tasmania, and put a topic on the table. I've been very fortunate as the Minister to have the opportunity to be in the room with them and actually see that in action. They're a diverse range of young people, so you get the full spectrum of what they're thinking at that time, which is really great.

CHAIR - It's also an opportunity to make sure the students themselves are getting consistent messages.

Ms PALMER - Yes, absolutely.

CHAIR - Any other questions on 3 from anyone?

Ms PALMER - That was 2.

CHAIR - Sorry, I was looking at 3. This is in relation to supporting the resourcing of project teams and including people with project management experience. We know the State budget is tight and constrained. Has this been a challenge? And have you got the adequate resources to deliver the work that you've committed to here in this particular area?

Ms PALMER - Yeah. DECYP has certainly strengthened project resourcing and capability across major reforms. Short-term reform teams have been assembled to make sure that experienced staff lead key change. This was done with the swift six when DECYP first came together and also to support responses to the commission of inquiry. The project management office provides recruitment support, capability uplift and professional learning, and over 200 staff have been trained in project management since 2023.

Ms WEBSTER - Just also to extrapolate that, I think the Minister mentioned that we have those over 200 staff that have been trained. For really large projects or specific projects, we would absolutely seek to get specific and bespoke resources in. We certainly have done that with some of our larger projects. In any infrastructure projects, the Department has a really strong infrastructure project approach. We have our own internal resources that we've really built up in that space.

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If I'm able to use the example of steering Committees as well. When we establish a steering Committee, we would get that external expertise from other Departments. Not necessarily taking a resource from another Department but taking the people and putting them on a steering Committee where they've led major projects they've been involved in, whether it's major infrastructure, key change management projects. Then we would actually use their expertise on a project steering Committee. That gives us that external view. If I think of a couple of our steering Committees at the moment, we have: Department of Health, Department of Premier and Cabinet, we have Department of Justice, those sorts of people who have been in large projects on those steering Committees able to work with our project managers to identify risks, to identify issues and to help them as the project goes on.

I think whilst it can be, in a small state like ours, those resources can be scarce, I think we have a really great way of identifying and collaborating with other Departments as well.

CHAIR - That said, do you believe there are adequate resources to deliver the intent of this?

Ms WEBSTER - I think there is. I think it very much, again, depends on the project because we do look at moving people around the Department. They often get a lot out of that themselves. We do sometimes have to prioritise some projects over other projects. That's just a realistic way of what we do. But certainly, in terms of the intent of the recommendation at the time, I believe that has been addressed.

Ms BURGESS - I wanted to expand a little bit on the capability development side of things. Coincidentally, I met with - and it was coincidentally, key project leaders from across the agency yesterday to touch base and talk about, now that we've got the embedded approach of we've got a project management office and we've got the templates, and we've got the practices in a shared space where people - what next? What else do we need from a capability development point of view? There was a really good discussion about, how do we develop a community of practice in this space, so how do we make sure that we're growing people all the time or onboarding people appropriately in that space? There was a view at that point in time that there's some areas that we probably need to strengthen given that, as you would appreciate, staffing and resourcing in the agency doesn't remain static. People move around, change jobs, come in and out. How do we keep that capability level at the level that we need to make sure that we can deliver on projects for Government? As you may be aware, the independent education review's Recommendations 11 and 14 went to implementation and de-implementation. That, of course, is part of running a good project and supporting people to move, so do we need some more practice and skill sets developed in that implementation/de-implementation space and what does that look like? Another area for further growth and development was in the change management space, so how do we continue to embed that change management piece into all of the projects that we do, be they big or small?

CHAIR - I think we've basically covered that. We will go to 4, which relates to project management approach, including clear responsibilities and accountabilities down to the project task level. You did talk a bit about this earlier. Is there a document that you have that actually outlines this? It might be helpful to have that. It's not that we don't believe you, it would just be helpful to have something that makes it evident that it's sitting there in the system and it's accessible, not necessarily to the public, but to people who are in the system.

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Ms WEBSTER - I think we can. I think we have those documents at each project level, going down to project task.

CHAIR - It's not one of your templates, as such?

Ms WEBSTER - I think we can probably provide something that shows the sponsor, the senior accountable officer, the tasks, the timeframes, the risks and those sorts of things. We can definitely provide something to the Committee that outlines that.

CHAIR - Is that process applied to all projects, big and small? I think you alluded to that earlier.

Ms WEBSTER - Yes. If I use the Commission of Inquiry as an example, we would have a sponsor for each one of the recommendations. We'd then have a senior accountable officer and then it would report through to the executive leadership team each month to determine the risks, the issues and how we're proceeding against the timeframe. That sort of example extrapolates across the various projects, depending on the size of the project.

Ms PALMER - Perhaps, Chair, it also goes back to what the Secretary was talking about before about plans on a page that you see embedded right across for that day-to-day management of projects.

CHAIR - Have you got a particular project or policy piece with regard to senior secondary? These seem a bit more high level than the senior secondary student outcomes that the Auditor-General was actually auditing. Is there an example you could provide to us in that space?

Ms PALMER - I will ask the Secretary to talk to that.

Ms WEBSTER - I think we can definitely provide that, from a Lifting Literacy perspective or perhaps curriculum development, or one example from the projects that were specifically examined by the Auditor-General. That's what you're asking?

CHAIR - Yes, and basically how that's changed or improved - one would hope there's been improvement - and how the outcomes of that have been measured. Do you have that level of detail?

Ms WEBSTER - We can provide something that addresses those issues for you.

CHAIR - After we get the *Hansard* we will write to you with a request. The object of this Committee is to ensure that if you have committed in full to a recommendation, which you have, you've actually delivered on it, but you also know it's working, otherwise what's the point, really? It might have been better to do something different to achieve the outcome.

Mr WINTER - I wanted to ask about the way you're monitoring the success of the extension schools over time. I don't spend as much time living and breathing this as you do, but speaking to my local schools, I go to some extension schools who tell me that things are fantastic, the kids are really benefiting, their enrolments are high, and I go to some that tell me the exact opposite. How are you going about assessing, in the school-by-school way, how those extension schools are performing in years 11 and 12?

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Ms PALMER - I would absolutely agree with your comment. As I've been going around visiting all our different schools and spending a lot of time in our colleges, I will speak to young people who would never have gone past Year 10 if it hadn't been for this opportunity to see extension schools right across the state. Then you will go to some schools where the very vast majority of leavers at Year 10 are making a decision to go to colleges. This has been a very important policy to ensure - a bit of an equaliser, I think - that if going to college is too great a distance from where you are, or anxiety we know plays quite a key role for some young people - we've been able to ensure that all young people have really got that opportunity if they choose to stay where they feel safe, which is great.

In 2025, we saw nearly 12 per cent of our senior secondary cohort opting to study at one of our extension schools, so that represents 1,086 individual young people who - I'm not saying that without this option they wouldn't have gone on to year 11 and 12, but they did make quite possibly a large number of that cohort of 1,000 children who could possibly have ended their education at Year 10.

Mr WINTER - Does that include the co-enrolled students? Does that 12 per cent include those co-enrolments?

Ms PALMER - I will take that on notice. My expectation is that it would, because we do see great collaboration even between our schools and our colleges. I have some stats here. You've got 1,086 students, as I mentioned, who are individual young people who have chosen to go through our extension schools, 11.8 per cent of total Government senior secondary FTE and 404 students in shared enrolments.

Mr WINTER - Of those 1,086, 404 are shared?

Ms PALMER - That is the information I have here around shared enrolments.

CHAIR - Are they more predominantly in the regions or is it across the state? You may not have that information with you right now. We will keep going while you see if you can get that information.

Mr WINTER - The other one I was interested in, just speaking to teachers and principals, was around students who are enrolled online for Year 11 and 12.

Ms PALMER - As in eSchool?

Mr WINTER - Yes. How many enrolments do we have around that? Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think they're still associated with a Year 11 and 12 school.

Ms WEBSTER - I can answer that. For eSchool - and this is at 2025 - Tasmanian eSchool is 102 actual enrolments.

Mr WINTER - But am I right to say that even though there's 102 that are part of the eSchool, each student still gets associated with a Year 11 and 12 physical school as well?

Ms PALMER - I ask Mark Sivills to come to the table.

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Mr MARK SIVILLS, DIRECTOR B-12 PROVISION, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

Mr SIVILLS - Could you restate the question?

Mr WINTER - I hope I can remember it. I was just asking about those eSchool enrolments. There's 102 and I was asking if each of those individual students is still associated with a physical, bricks and mortar school as well, or are they simply enrolled as part of the eSchool?

Mr SIVILLS - I think it would vary. They're associated with the eSchool, that's their full-time enrolment. Most of the time we have an awful lot of young people who are also engaged through the Virtual Learning Tasmania program, and they are associated with another school, so I think around 36 schools in 2025 were supporting a partial online enrolment which is operated through the Virtual Learning Tasmania program. They are associated with a base school or a home school in a different way to eSchool students would be.

Mr WINTER - How are you monitoring and measuring the success of those students within the eSchool in terms of their results and attainment?

Mr SIVILLS - Measuring the results of the eSchool -

Mr WINTER - How are they performing? How are their academic results in -

Mr SIVILLS - I would have to take that specific one on notice to come back to exactly what the results are for each school.

Mr WINTER - Less so about what the results are, but more about how you're measuring them. Do you measure those in the same way as you would through NAPLAN? How is the Department monitoring the success of that program?

Ms WEBSTER - Just so I can understand, the question is not necessarily what their attainment is or what their results are, but do we measure if they're any different to students that might be enrolled at a physical school, is that correct?

Mr WINTER - Yes.

Mr SIVILLS - I think we would be able to get information about the relative performance of students who are undertaking learning through the eSchool. I think it probably should be noted we're talking about a quite a different cohort that are enrolled through that school for particular reasons.

Mr WINTER - I'm very aware of that. The audit was about how we're rolling out projects but also how we're measuring the success of them. That's where the question came from rather than pointing to the specific results.

Minister, the extension school program started with a target of Government getting to an attainment rate of 75 per cent. We're well short of that, but I'm just wondering, in terms of

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setting targets and trying to achieve them, does the Government still have that 75 per cent as a target or has that been changed?

Ms WEBSTER - That was the target in 2014. From our perspective, that hasn't changed.

Mr WINTER - What are the specific programs or changes that you're looking to make in order to try and get us up to 75 per cent? Are there any specific programs or projects that you're looking at in order to get to that 75 per cent mark?

Ms PALMER - There's a number of bodies of work around this and a number of strategies in place. One of the things that we have a real focus on is when children go into year 11, if there are children who are not continually engaging, we first go to our schools to say, 'Where is this young person?' We go to our schools first to really engage because they know the young people, they know the families.

If the schools aren't able to engage those young people, we have a team within the Department called Back on Track, and they do an incredible job where they go to that next level of engaging with the child, engaging with the family, and really looking at how they can get them back engaged in some form of learning. They are an amazing team, and they really do a great job.

I know somewhere in this folder are the numbers of young people who at the beginning of the year - I think there was over 1,000 - who were not engaged, and by September of that year, I believe, over 500 of those children had actually been re-engaged in learning. Whether that is going on to years 11 and 12, whether that's going on to an apprenticeship, whether that's moving into TAFE, into a VET course. Here it is: 1,200 young people were identified as not having an approved learning plan who were under 18 and did not have an appropriate exemption and by the end of September 2025, we only had 715 young people who didn't have that approved learning plan. We know that there's a variety of reasons for some of those 700 children, some of them leave the state, some of them simply won't engage, their families won't engage, but in 2025 alone, there was 500 young people that were re-engaged. That work was done through the Back on Track team, but also through our schools as well. A number of those young people would have been contacted by the schools, their families would have been contacted, and they've re-engaged, they've felt that connection moving into Years 11 and 12.

Mr WINTER - Obviously, the improvement is fantastic to go from 1,200 to 715 during the year, but how's that 1,200 number tracked historically against previous years? Do you have that data as well about whether that number's - or is that the first year you've measured it?

Ms BURGESS - First year of full data.

Mr WINTER - Is that - I mean, is it fair to say given the law changes that predate my time in Parliament, significantly, does that - is that effectively saying that those 1,200 students was actually unlawful that they weren't - didn't have an approved learning plan?

Ms PALMER - The amendment was made to the Act to say that up until the age of 18 we want you engaged in learning. This is very much about not having a harsh stick and saying, 'Well, you're lawfully not engaged'.

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Mr WINTER - I'm not here advocating that we take any action. In terms of the policy outcome and the law change, you've actually identified here in this data that there are 1,200 students that are actually now sitting outside of the legal framework that Parliament set, which is a big number. I really appreciate that, as part of the issue outlined, 500 students were then put back into a school and into a learning environment, which is fantastic. I think it's an interesting piece of data, and, in fact, I think this goes to the audit that you're now measuring success or lack of success under this.

Ms PALMER - It's a fantastic piece of data and a great piece of information. It's really important that there is such a variety of reasons why a young person may not turn up on day one of Year 11. For some, that re-engagement's really quick, and then when you have more complex young people, complex family or complex circumstances, that can take a little longer to get them back engaged.

But it's so fantastic that now across the board, we can actually see where a child is not engaged and we can reach out to them and get them back engaged in school. I think that's a fantastic outcome that we've seen through this data collection. I think one of the other things that has been really important with this is that the responsibility of those - a cohort of children who are not engaged, that's just not in Government schools. We take responsibility for children from Catholic education system, children from the independent education system.

To have that wonderful collaboration now through the work of ACE right across the entire spectrum of education in Tasmania means that we are actually able to see the children who aren't engaged and we are able to take action and take action quickly which we know is going to result in better outcomes for us as a state. I will just pass to the Deputy Secretary because she's had quite a lot to do in this space.

Ms BURGESS - Thank you. Another thing, now that we've got that full set of data, we've been talking with the Secretary and the Minister about how we take that forward now that we know the issue. Of course, what we do know from research is the earlier we can intervene in an issue for a child or a young person, so once we start seeing the indicators that they're not engaged or they're not attending, that's the time really to try and intervene.

What we will be doing is taking forward to ACE, of which our Secretary is a member, a program of work that we can look at, how can we now work together to identify these young people earlier, put in place different types of interventions so that we're not in the situation that they're landing in the data and with their loss to us. Because we also know the longer the distant the time between them losing regular contact with the schooling system, the more difficult it is to re-engage those children and young people back into the system.

Ms PALMER - I think probably a really great example in this space - and this is actually a case study of a Tasmanian child. They were 16, they had completed Year 10, there had been a family breakdown and they'd actually relocated to a different part of the State to a different regional community and they were living with a grandparent.

They would have appeared in that number of a child that was disengaged. Now, that's not through any fault of their own, this particular young person wanted to be at school and they wanted to continue with their education, but we had to help them in their new living circumstances to say, 'Well, you can go to this school now this is in the area. Here's what you need, and let's wrap some support around you to get you re-engaged in your new setting'. As

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I say, many, many reasons why a young person may not turn up on day one of year 11, but we now have that information and we have the opportunity to reach out to them and to say okay, here are the options available to you and we are going to help you transition back into learning. And as I say, fantastic to see that 500 young people were re-engaged through schools' efforts and through the Back on Track team's efforts just in last year alone.

Mr WINTER - Thanks for that. As I spoke about earlier, it's pretty clear that the extension schools are wildly popular and successful in some schools and maybe not so in others: do you have data of how many Year 11 and 12 enrolments there are per school? Is it publicly available? If it not, are you able to provide that to us?

Ms WEBSTER - Certainly, we can provide it. I don't think that breakdown of data is publicly available. We've got an aggregated data, but we can certainly provide it to the Committee.

Mr WINTER - We appreciate you taking that on notice. I presume that we're going to see in that list that some schools will have very low enrolments; what steps do you take when you've got a situation with these very low enrolments in a school? How do you work with that school to try and presumably lift the enrolment in order to provide a better level of education to the students?

Ms PALMER - Yes. I think everything about this policy around extension schools was just ensuring that all young people have an opportunity to be engaged in their learning that meets their needs, you know, where they are at that particular point in time. I think that this is a very important part of the narrative of ensuring that we have equity to education across the entire state for all children, but I think it is one part of the work that we're doing certainly around defining educational success, which is the body of work we were referring to earlier.

CHAIR - We might move on to 6 then. You did provide a copy of the outcomes framework. I assume that's what we're talking about, that document?

Ms WEBSTER - Yes.

CHAIR - Recommendation 6. Again, we've talked about some of those things. In the interest of time, is there any additional information that you want to provide into how you've implemented this recommendation and how it's been measured?

Ms WEBSTER - Thank you. Through you, Minister: I think again, it really goes to the youth participation database and that is a key element of this particular recommendation and that is now complete and it's been updated regularly. As the Deputy Secretary said, I think in terms of evidence base, it's really aligned to what the independent education review said around making sure that, you know, that data - and the Department has a lot of data that we use and I think use it in a way that improves collaboration and we have, I think, shared that data particularly around the Minister, and we've mentioned ACE several times. I think there's a really good collaborative data-sharing approach there. I think really, unless, Jen, did you want to -

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Ms BURGESS - There's only one thing that I would add: as part of the work that we've been doing, we've now developed what's called a TCE² tracker, which is a tool that helps schools understand where each individual student is at, both from their program of learning, but also from whether they're attending and engaging in their learning, and that categorises kids that might be at risk of not achieving the ultimate goal of the attainment of the TCE, their VET³ certificate or the TCEA,⁴ or even the Big Picture now. I think that that's a really good evidence-based step forward, where now we've got real time information and data about how students are going with regards to that attainment measure.

CHAIR - We will move quickly to Recommendation 7. In terms of this recommendation around data and data literacy initiatives, I do note that you have made a comment: 'Further work to develop data literacy across the agency will be ongoing,' and you reference the supporting documents that have been created for this. Are you providing these documents to us to demonstrate how this is being achieved? What are the guiding principles, if you like, that are in these documents?

Ms WEBSTER - Through you, Minister: I think the Deputy Secretary mentioned the TCE tracker, which is really the evidence of this one.

CHAIR - In terms of digital literacy, this is a big challenge, particularly in our regions, and some of it's because of connectivity as well, like it's the double-edged sword there a bit - what's the particular plan of work for that in improving digital literacy?

Ms WEBSTER - I probably haven't got that information -

CHAIR - Sorry, it's data literacy, not digital.

Ms WEBSTER - For students.

CHAIR - I misread it, it's data literacy, I thought it was digital. We were talking about digital literacy earlier and I just automatically put it there. The data literacy piece is for the staff assessing this data to be able to make sense of it. Is that what we're talking about here? I'm just trying to understand what it is.

Ms WEBSTER - I think it was really around our ability to understand the data and be able to track it, as we've just said, with the TCE tracker. I think we, across the board, analysing and understanding data I think is something that we're working really hard on in the Department around some of the things that we're doing, particularly in the groupings of schools, the work that we're doing there to understand, comparing apples with apples as well. I think that's really important. I don't know, Jen, if you've got anything?

CHAIR - The reporting that you can pull out of that, the TCE tracker, does that identify various - like we have colleges in our regions that have much higher enrolments than perhaps than some of the others because there are limited options, even in the extension schools, for students. Can you look at those - comparing apples with apples - how do you make sense of that data?

² Tasmanian Certificate of Education

³ Vocational Education and Training

⁴ Tasmanian Certificate of Educational Achievement

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Ms BURGESS - It goes down to an individual student level, so each school or college would have access to their cohort. Then from there it breaks down their attendance rate, their enrolment, therefore if they attend and attain, will they be on track for their TCE. That's at a school level. Now, there's work being undertaken to see what does that mean for groupings of schools, or in the case of the MSO⁵ when they move into that more senior secondary space, what will it mean for that? Then what's the accountability sitting with the various layers within that organisational structure to make sure that as many students as possible are achieving success.

CHAIR – How's that reported, the outcomes of that data?

Ms BURGESS - The TCE tracker in and of itself is an internal tool for monitoring.

CHAIR - Yes, and I don't expect it to be public. There would be a lot of sensitive information in there, I would imagine.

Ms PALMER - We've actually got on paper an example of what that tracking system looks like -

CHAIR - Thank would be great.

Ms PALMER - ... if you would like me to table that.

CHAIR - If you could put it on the table there. Thanks, Minister.

Ms PALMER - Obviously there's nothing identifiable there. That's just an example of the information that's been collected that schools then have access to.

CHAIR - Alright, that's helpful. Okay, we are out of time. Is there any really pressing issues or anything you wish you told us and haven't, Minister?

Ms PALMER - No, thank you.

Mr EDMUNDS - Any big secrets you want to reveal?

Ms PALMER - No.

Mr WINTER - Is there anything we should've asked, that we didn't?

CHAIR - We thank you for your time and for appearing before the Committee today. This is an important body of work that we do, following up on the Auditor-General's reports. He does some of his follow-ups, we do others. It's great to see that there is progress being made on these and that the recommendations were accepted before. Thank you for your time today.

Ms PALMER - Thank you, Chair.

The witnesses withdrew.

⁵ Multi-School Organisation

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The Committee adjourned at 3:52 pm.