

# Michelle O'Byrne MP

Labor Member for Bass

The Hon. Jeremy Rockliff MP  
Minister for Education and Training

Dear Jeremy,

I write regarding the conversation we had at the conclusion of the Australian Education Union Forum about your proposal to reduce school starting ages as part of the review of the Education Act.

At that time you expressed a genuine offer to discuss what it would take to 'get me on board' with the change to school starting age.

I want to respond to this offer in a similarly genuine manner.

As you are aware, and have acknowledged publicly, Labor strongly supports early learning programs and the importance of providing opportunities for children and parents to engage in play based early childhood education. That is why we invested in and continue to support the Child and Family Centres.

However, as we indicated in our initial submission to the review process, we do not believe that Tasmania should simply reduce its school starting age to be in line with 'the rest of the country' particularly as there is such a difference in each jurisdiction's early years and early school investment. Instead we believe that we need to make decisions based on what will achieve the best outcomes for students.

As I said in our conversation I do not believe that the case for lowering the school starting age has been made and as such we have not supported it. Much of the quoted evidence in support is related to different parent engagements and structures. No evidence has been provided that shows that simply lowering the starting age will achieve better outcomes for students nor to indicate that it will get more families involved in learning with their children. There is however evidence that outlines the risk of such an initiative.

If we want to improve long term outcomes for Tasmanian students, and I believe we do, then it is essential that we thoroughly examine whether lowering the starting age is the best way to achieve this.

In response to your approach I propose that lowered starting ages be removed from the draft bill and instead a comprehensive examination of the issue be undertaken by the Underwood Centre.

The Underwood Centre was established with bipartisan support to provide solid evidence and research before embarking on significant policy reforms such as this.

A full examination could consider the most beneficial age for children to commence in both formal and play based learning environments, what needs to be provided to support learning prior to enrolment in school and what needs to be in place during those crucial early years of school engagement.

This review would allow us to understand the impacts on families and schools, and what the most suitable early learning environment is for young children.

I hope you will give careful consideration to this proposal as a way forward to ensure a genuine evidence-based approach to what is the best for our young children and ensure they commence at the most appropriate starting age.

I look forward to working with you to ensure that we get the best educational outcomes for Tasmania.

Sincerely,



Hon. Michelle O'Byrne MP  
Shadow Minister for Education and Training

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