

leaving school early

[compelling reasons to help young people keep learning]

Early school leavers can expect poorer job prospects and less income than their classmates who go on to finish Year 12. Even so, more than 1 out of every 4 students leaves school once it is no longer compulsory for them to attend. Why are they leaving? What is being done to encourage them to stay?

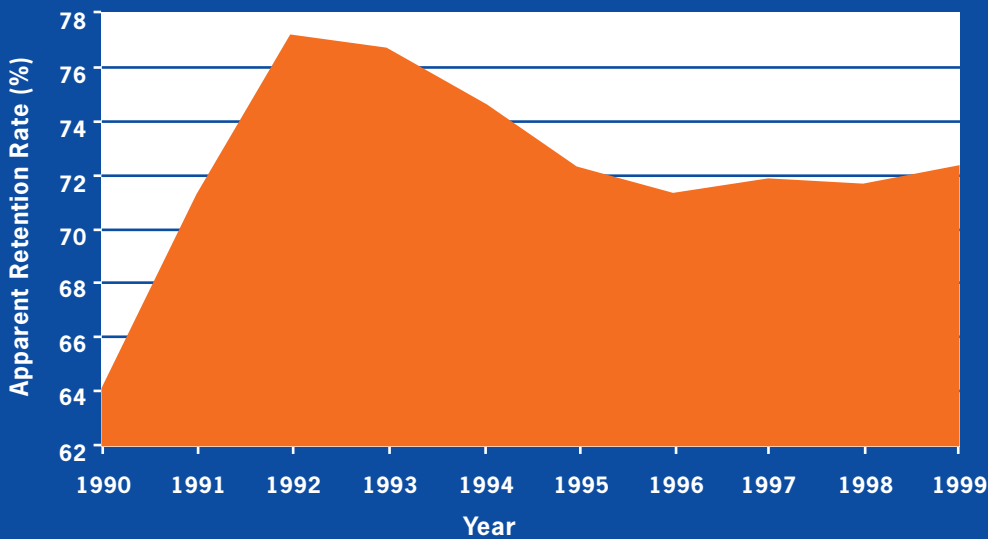
fewer students are staying on to year 12

While State and Territory laws vary, attending school is generally not compulsory for anyone over the age of 15. Most (71%) have reached Year 10 by then. Ahead, four pathways are immediately available:

- continue on to post-compulsory schooling (Years 11 and 12)
- participate in other forms of post-compulsory education or training (such as an apprenticeship or a TAFE course)
- enter the labour market
- do not participate in education, training or work.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the proportion of secondary school students who remained at school to Year 12 peaked in 1992 at 77%, but then dropped to 71% by 1996 (see Figure 1). It has since increased slightly, and currently remains stable at around 72%. About one out of every three boys, and one in five girls, leave school before completing Year 12.¹

Figure 1: Apparent School Retention Rates to Year 12.



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (1991-2000) *Schools Australia*. Catalogue No. 4220.0.

most leave early to get a job or apprenticeship

More than half of the early school leavers in 1997 left with the intention of getting a job or an apprenticeship. A further one quarter left for school-related reasons, such as:

- "I didn't like school", or
- "I wanted to do job-training/courses/subjects not offered at school".

The remainder left largely for financial reasons, because of low standards of achievement at school, or because "teachers thought I should".²

early leavers have fewer job and training opportunities and earn less

People who have completed Year 12 or its equivalent adapt better to changes in the workplace and have greater opportunities to participate in further education and training.³ This means that early leavers who take up a vocational equivalent to Year 12, such as a TAFE course or apprenticeship, have better prospects than those who don't. Those who do not reach this level of learning:

- spend less time employed
- earn less
- are twice as likely to be unemployed at the age of 24
- have less access to on-the-job training
- are less likely to engage in lifelong learning.⁴

The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling estimates that around 35,000 young people who left school early in 1998 will not take up education and training again at any stage during their lifetime. The cost to each individual of not improving their knowledge and skills is approximately \$15,000 per year in lost income. The total cost to Australia is estimated at \$2.6 billion each year.⁵

Although the majority of early school leavers intend to enter the workforce or job-related education and training, a number encounter barriers along the way. Girls face poorer employment prospects and can experience significant social disadvantage. They are less likely than boys to participate in an apprenticeship, further education or training, or to work full-time.⁶ Those aged 16 to 18 years are more likely to be disadvantaged by pregnancy and childcare, or sickness and disability.⁷

Overall, those particularly at risk are teenagers who are neither in full-time employment nor in education or training. This group may not be in employment long enough to access on-the-job training and are at great risk of being unemployed in later life. In May 1999, it was estimated that more than 180,000 15 to 19 year-olds, or 14% of all teenagers in Australia, were not in education, training or full-time work. Around 70% of them were early school leavers.⁸

Research by the Australian National Training Authority has found that 16% of the community are unlikely to participate in further education or training in the near future, even though they recognise the value in doing so.⁹ They feel they face the greatest barriers to learning, and have a general fear of new technology. Many of these people left school at the age of 16 years or earlier.

with better advice, more students might choose to finish year 12

Around 70% of young people choose the course of their career before or during Year 10.¹⁰ Those who leave at this stage report having less access to careers services and vocational programs, which are typically provided to students in Years 11 or 12.¹¹ These early leavers could be making decisions without a clear set of directions for their future. They may be unaware of the full range of options available to them. They may not have access to the information and assistance they need in order to make the transition from school to work or further education and training.

The Australian National Training Authority's research shows that 7% of the community are currently involved in learning activities because other people want them to be, not because they value it themselves. The young people in this group include students on the verge of dropping out. They are generally not confident that learning will deliver benefits for them in terms of personal or career advancement and this may influence their decision to leave early.

Acting on these findings, the Australian National Training Authority is implementing a communications strategy, to reinforce the economic and personal benefits of training, education and job-related learning, as well as preparing information on relevant support services for young people.

The communications strategy is underpinned by activities to improve the education and training system and strengthen support for young people as they reach the end of their compulsory schooling. These include:

- professional development for careers advisers and practitioners
- partnerships between schools and registered training organisations to investigate integrated work programs, New Apprenticeships and recognised vocational education and training in schools
- work within the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs to:
 - improve careers advice and online information services
 - develop explicit and well articulated post-compulsory options and pathways for young people
 - provide opportunities for vocational learning in Years 9 and 10.

providing more choices at school could mean fewer decisions to leave early

The introduction of vocational education and training in schools is providing options for young people who otherwise might not complete their education. By 1999, more than one in three senior secondary students were participating in this initiative.¹² It is one reason why school retention rates have stabilised.¹³

Vocational education and training fosters links between the school system and enterprises, industries and employers. These links keep young people in education and training which is relevant to them, their current employer and their future employers.¹⁴

community-wide support is needed

School retention rates are not uniform throughout Australia, nor even within each State and Territory. In Victoria, for example, retention rates reach about 90% in high socio-economic status metropolitan areas, and decrease to about 55% in low socio-economic status urban areas.¹⁵

Clearly, income security is an important factor. About 15% of young people currently in secondary school and receiving the Youth Allowance would have left early if such government benefits were not available to them.¹⁶ Students receiving income support who do decide to leave early are less likely to say the reason is to find a job or to earn money. They tend to cite negative aspects of schooling, such as a general dislike of school or teachers.¹⁷ Of the younger Youth Allowance recipients who were not studying or training in 1999, 13% said they might abandon their intentions of returning to learning if they became ineligible for benefits of this type.

While income support schemes can play an essential role, young people face combinations of both real and perceived barriers to remaining in school to Year 12. These affect their future intentions to participate in work or further education and training. Factors such as family and community support, information, guidance and learning options also have an important influence.¹⁸

In the United Kingdom, research has shown that the labour market problems faced by early leavers are compounded, if not caused, by wider social disadvantage and exclusion.¹⁹

Young people who leave school before Year 12 in Australia are generally more likely to have the following characteristics. This is not to say that these characteristics are always present, nor that wherever they exist the student will not complete Year 12. They indicate where greater support may be needed.

- low levels of school achievement
- low socio-economic background
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background
- homelessness or insecure housing²⁰
- parents and/or themselves have been receiving income support or benefits²¹
- parents have spent less than 12 years in education or training
- attended a government school
- reside outside metropolitan areas.²²

Not only can young people who stay on to finish secondary school look forward to better employment prospects: it is good for the community. Fostering a highly skilled and adaptable workforce is a vital step in preparing as a nation for the future in a competitive global market. It could also reduce the number of people potentially requiring government welfare support.

The Australian Student Traineeship Foundation suggests that fostering partnerships among industries, businesses, communities and education providers is a way to create sustainable work and life transitions for all young Australians.²³ In fact, many such partnerships have already been established. Through initiatives such as appointing a Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce and supporting Full Service Schools, the Commonwealth Government is recognising the importance of developing more individualised mechanisms of support, both inside school and beyond.²⁴

Ultimately, the support of family, community, government, employers, information providers and guidance officers, as well as the development of integrated, seamless pathways between education and training, are vital to the retention of young people in education and training.

suggested readings and websites

Australian Council for Education Research (2000) *Early School Leaving and 'Non-Completion' in Australia*. Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) Briefing Number 2, October 2000.

Australian National Training Authority (2000) *National Marketing Strategy for Skills and Lifelong Learning: Market segmentation report*. March 2000

Department of Families and Community Services (1999) *Youth Allowance Evaluation: Interim report*. December 1999.

Dusseldorp Skills Forum (1999) *Why Australia Needs a Youth Commitment: A discussion paper*.

National Centre for Vocational Education Research (1999) *Research at a Glance: Early school leavers and VET*.

Reference Group on Welfare Reform (2000) *Participation Support for a More Equitable Society*. March 2000.

www.itpaystostay.com

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endnotes

¹ ABS (2000) *Schools, Australia, 1999*. Catalogue No. 4222.0.

² Marks, G. N. & Fleming, N. (1999) *Early School Leaving in Australia: Findings from the 1995 Year 9 LSAY Cohort*. Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report No. 11, Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

³ McKenzie, P. (1999) *How to Make Lifelong Learning a Reality*. Monash University Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) and ACER, October 1999.

⁴ McKenzie, P. (1999);
Dusseldorp, J. (1999) *Australia's Youth: From risk to opportunity. Practices and potential of community partnerships*. Dusseldorp Skills Forum;
Secretary of State for Social Security (1999) *Opportunity for All: Tackling poverty and social exclusion*. Presented to Parliament September 1999. United Kingdom:
In the United Kingdom the most powerful indicator of unemployment at the age of 21 is being unemployed and not participating in education or training as a young person.

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⁶ Lamb, S. & Rumberger, R. (1999) *The Initial Work and Education Experiences of Early School Leavers: A Comparative Study of Australia and the United States*. Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report No. 14, Melbourne: ACER.

⁷ Social Exclusion Unit (1999) *Bridging the Gap: New Opportunities for 16-18 year olds not in Education, Employment or Training*. Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister, United Kingdom.

⁸ Dusseldorp, J. (1999).

⁹ Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) (1999) *National Marketing Strategy: Skills and lifelong learning*. Brisbane: ANTA.

¹⁰ Deloitte, Touche, Tohmatsu (1996) *Perception of Australian TAFE: National follow-on research - Findings*. Volume 1.

¹¹ Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Training (CPET) (2000). *Labour Market Outcomes for Young People*. Draft, September 2000. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne.

¹² Taskforce on Vocational Education and Training in Schools (2000) *New Pathways for Learning*. Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA); Proportion based on MCEETYA data for VET in Schools students in 1999 and ABS Schools data for 1999 (Years 11 and 12).

¹³ Sweet, R. (1994) *Vocational Education in Upper Secondary Schools: Why? How?* Dusseldorp Skills Forum;
Lamb, S. (1996) *Completing School in Australia: Trends in the 1990s*. Melbourne: ACER, cited in ABS (1997) *Youth Australia: A social report*. Catalogue No. 4111.0.

¹⁴ Sweet, R. (1995) *Linking Schools and Workplaces: Lessons from Australia and overseas*. Dusseldorp Skills Forum.

¹⁵ Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Training (CPET) (2000) *Early School Leavers - Motives, Employment and Training Destinations*. The University of Melbourne. Research Letter No. 2, August 2000.

¹⁶ Department of Families and Community Services (1999) *Youth Allowance Evaluation: Interim report*.

¹⁷ Department of Families and Community Services (1999).

¹⁸ ANTA (1999).

¹⁹ Social Exclusion Unit (1999).

²⁰ Dwyer (1996) cited in Misko, J. (1999) *Transition Pathways: What happens to young people when they leave school*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

²¹ Department of Families and Community Services (1999); Reference Group on Welfare Reform (2000) *Participation Support for a More Equitable Society*.

²² Marks, G. N. & Fleming, N. (1999).

²³ Australian Student Traineeship Foundation (ASTF) (1999) *Bright Futures for Young Australians: Community partnerships for the future of successful transitions*.

²⁴ Dusseldorp Skills Forum (1999) *Why Australia need a Youth Commitment: A discussion paper*.



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