

'Gifted kids are being ignored. They don't exist': Is the education system failing our smartest students?

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Tasmanian Association for the Gifted president Lynne Maher says the state's education system has made little gain since her son was a high school student 10 years ago. (By [Jessica Hayes](#))

Mother-of-two Kristen* knew something was very wrong when her academically gifted child no longer wanted to attend school.

The happy, healthy nine-year-old who once rushed to class had become sad and withdrew from her family and friends.

"For her to be so broken that she refused to go to school was really serious," Kristen said.

"It was serious-level psychological distress, and if it went on self-harm and suicide were a risk."

Her little girl is one of the estimated 9,000 Tasmanian children considered "gifted" — among those capable of achieving in the top 10 per cent of their age group.

Kristen, who asked the ABC not to use her real name, said her child had become bored and disengaged in the classroom.

Key points:

- The Tasmanian Association for the Gifted says there is no systemic identification of gifted students in the state.
- Experts believe Australia's egalitarian culture is impacting education policy in the states and territories.
- Advocates are calling for mandatory gifted education training in teaching degrees.

"She had been in a classroom where she just had had no work that remotely challenged her for a very long time," she said.

"She ended up being very distressed, low self-esteem, she was angry and frustrated."

After years battling the public system, Kristen eventually decided enrol her daughter at a private school.

"The issues she had were the direct result of not being identified as gifted [at her public school] and not having the kind of support she needed," Kristen said.

"I feel like the public system abandoned my child.

"Gifted kids are being ignored. They don't exist."

Misbehaving, daydreaming, dumbing down

Tasmanian Association for the Gifted (TAG) president Lynne Maher said Kristen's story was all too common.

The group is now calling for greater investment to fund dedicated department staff, improved student-to-psychologist ratios and a trial of selective schools or classrooms.

"If gifted students aren't catered for in their education, the risk is they may become bored and start misbehaving big time, daydreaming, dumbing themselves down to fit in or opting out and refusing to go to school," she said.

"They also start to develop anxiety and this sense of not fitting in, and that can lead to some other mental health problems such as depression or worse."

Ms Maher said there was a lack of consistency in the way schools were adopting and implementing the Tasmanian Education Department gifted student policies.

"There are some teachers who do well with gifted students, some schools identify gifted and talented coordinators, but there is no systemic identification of gifted students or catering for them," she said.

"Within the department we've got one officer who is dedicated to the needs of gifted students. It's not enough.

"The minimum that we really need is a gifted education officer in every region and we certainly need more than one in the state."

'Tall poppy syndrome' to blame: expert

University of New South Wales associate professor and gifted education expert Jae Jung said education policies in Australian states and territories often overlooked high-level outliers.

"In many ways Australia is an egalitarian society in areas such as academics where tall poppies [are] cut down," he said, citing sport as an exception.

"Now I am someone who fully supports looking after all students, but we just need to make sure we're looking after the schools at the higher end of the ability spectrum much better than we are doing now."

Dr Jung from said Tasmania's gifted education policies were not being implemented effectively due to shortcomings in teacher training.

"The relevant bodies, that accredit university teacher training programs, need to require all universities in Australia with teacher training courses to have a compulsory unit in gifted education," he said.

In a statement, Tasmania's Education Department said it was "committed to providing access to engaging educational programs for all gifted and highly able students".

The statement said where "significant adjustments" were made to student's learning plans, they were made in collaboration with the student's teacher and parents.

The Department cited a number of actions taken to support gifted students, including online courses delivered by nine specialist teachers state-wide, and said teacher development to help identify gifted students was "highly valued" and was a priority in the department's strategic plan.



Gifted education expert Associate Professor Jae Jung believes "tall poppy syndrome" is influencing education policy in Australia. (ABC News)