



# Kids who are smart and handy

## Lindsay Tanner

WAS pretty hopeless at woodwork when I was at school.

I was good at academic stuff such as English and history, but whenever I had to use my brain and hands at the same time, something went haywire.

I made a chess table with wobbly legs and 64 little veneer squares that curled up at the edges.

I suspect my woodwork teacher was pleased I moved on to French and economics.

There are lots of kids who are the exact opposite. They're not that interested in academic learning, but good at learning skills using their hands as well as their brains.

It's essential they get the chance to develop skills, but they sometimes get a raw deal in our school system.

These kids used to go to technical schools, but we abolished those in the early 1990s.

A uniform secondary school system was fine in theory, but it has created serious problems in practice. University entrance has become the universal measure of school performance.

Kids who don't want to go to university may be neglected.

Equipment for teaching kids technical and practical skills is a lot more expensive than it was when I was at school.

It's much more hi-tech

these days.

So it's become more costly for schools to teach practical skills and they get less recognition for doing it.

That's why some kids fall through the cracks.

They leave school as soon as they can, or sometimes get thrown out.

They're alienated from the school environment, often angry, and usually without serious direction in life.

A while ago, I met some of these young people at the Island Works, a specialist school that was in North Fitzroy and is now located in Coburg.

It's designed to get these kids back into formal learning and prepare them for apprenticeships.

It's got six streams: engineering, auto mechanics, hospitality, horticulture, building, and furniture and woodwork.

The kids I met were very smart and Island Works is giving them a chance to get back on track.

Imagine if the vast majority of my school subjects when I was 13 or 14 had been like woodwork.

How long would I have lasted?

I think I know the answer. I was lucky enough to attend a school that was serious about teaching the things I was good at and interested in.

Too many young people today don't really have that opportunity.

It's great that the Island Works exists, but I can't help wondering why it needs

to exist.

I don't blame state governments for this, because there are many factors involved.

And too often debates on serious issues like this end up with governments blaming other governments and not doing anything.

Last month Kevin Rudd committed Labor to funding a big program of upgrading technical facilities in schools.

Every secondary school in Australia will be able to get between \$500,000 and \$1.5 million to upgrade their metal shops, computer labs and woodwork facilities.

We won't solve the problem just by upgrading technical facilities in schools, but it will make a big difference.

Too many schools have outdated equipment.

For those kids who are more interested in technical things, that sends a big message.

Why should they be serious about learning when we're not serious about teaching?

We don't need everyone to be university educated, but we do need everyone to have skills.

Upgrading our school workshops is an important step in restoring the balance in our education system.

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