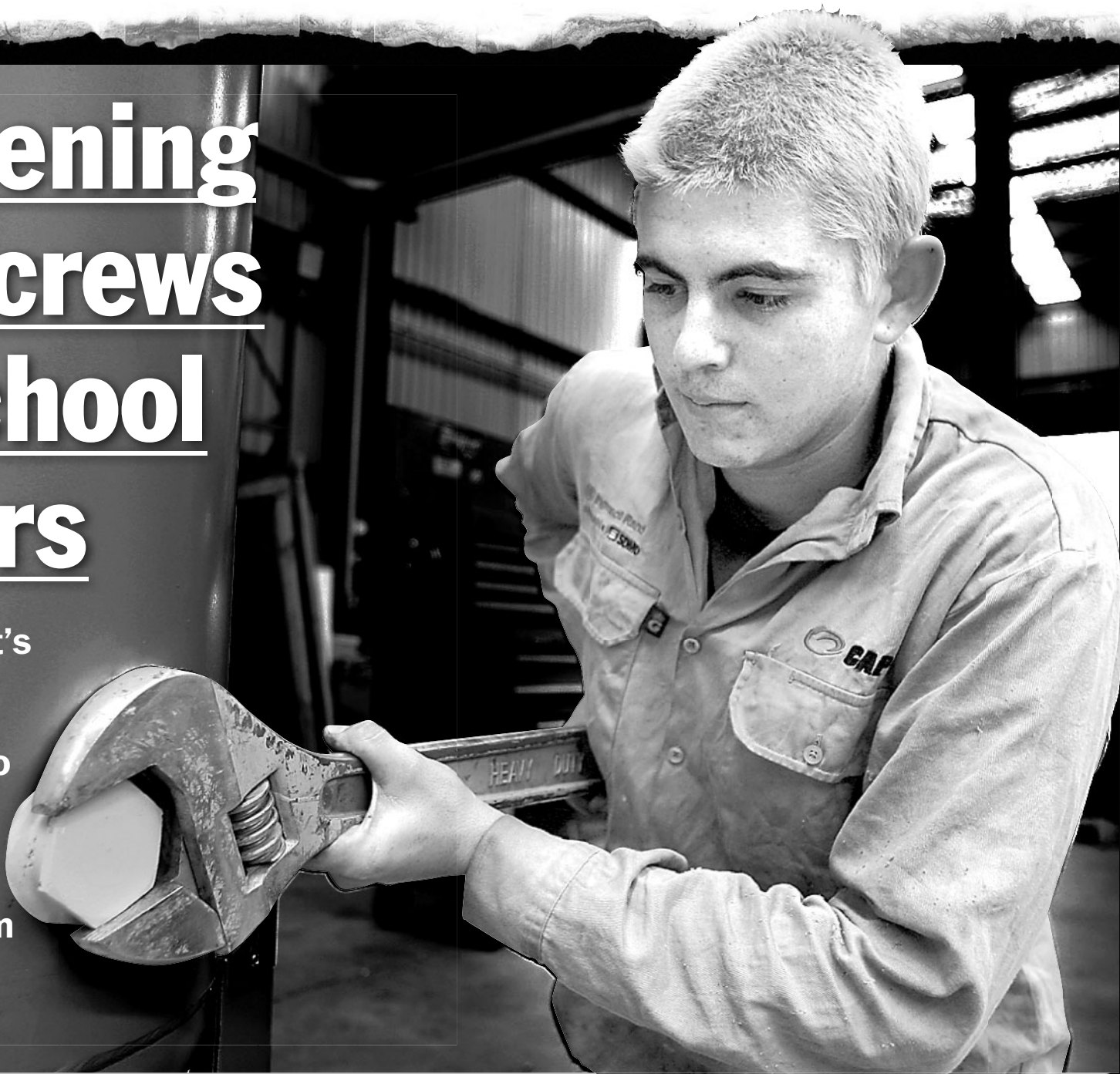


Tightening the screws on school leavers

The Government's plan to raise the compulsory education age to 17 must be backed by an effective guidance system for students, writes **LAUREN NOVAK**.



EACH year about 1200 16-year-olds drop out of school without a back-up plan. This year, the State Government has moved to halt the worrying trend by raising the compulsory education age to 17. As of yesterday, all students must be in school full-time until the age of 16 and "learning or earning" - a combination of school, vocational training or work - until age 17.

Research has found that, on average, young people who complete an extra year of study earn about 10 per cent more once in work.

In contrast, the Government warns that school leavers trying to get a job before gaining any qualifications have a one-in-five chance of being unemployed.

The new education age policy requires students to be at school full-time or combine school with training such as at TAFE, a registered training organisation or university study.

Exemptions can be granted for working 25 hours or more a week, or for home schooling.

A result of the policy is likely to be a retention rate much higher than last year's rate of 75.3 per cent.

The Government's latest move aims to improve the education and employment prospects of school leavers. It has drawn support from parents, teachers and principals.

However, educators are warning of a steep learning curve as they prepare to re-engage potential drop-outs forced to stay at school for one more year. Concerns have been raised about how the policy will be enforced and whether there will be enough money and staff to support it.

"If they (the Government) get this policy right and it's resourced properly then it should work," Australian Education Union state president Correna Haythorpe says.

"(But) there will be additional workloads (for teachers) and some programs will have to go on after hours. People will see their workload spike."

Ms Haythorpe says the challenge for teachers is "to find different ways to educate these children".

"If they (students) are disenchanted with

COMPULSORY EDUCATION AGE CRITERIA

- Students must be in full-time study or training until the age of 17.
- Students who complete the SACE or another qualification, such as the International Baccalaureate, before turning 17 are free to leave school.
- Students who left school last year but are still aged less than 17 for part of 2009 must be engaged in what is now known as an "approved learning program", or have an exemption, until they turn 17.
- An approved learning program can combine

school study, training at TAFE, a private organisation or university.

■ Young people can get an exemption from an approved learning program if working a minimum 25 hours a week.

■ If a student is 16 and wants to continue home schooling they need an exemption from an approved learning program until turning 17.

■ Students suspended from school for a period of time still are considered to be in an approved learning program.

■ More information can be found at www.educationage.sa.gov.au

what's happening there's a potential that they'll become an issue in terms of behaviour," she says.

SA Secondary Principals Association president Jim Davies says schools had been preparing for the change for some time and teachers would work closely with students to develop programs that suited their needs.

While the new policy would affect only a small proportion of students, more disadvantaged schools were likely to experience greater changes.

"What we suspect is going to be needed is a different level of support from school to school," he says.

SA Association of State School Organisations director David Knuckey, who represents the parents of about 90 per cent of state school students, agrees with the concept of the change though, saying keeping children in education longer "gives them greater opportunity".

He wanted assurances, though, that the new policy would be properly resourced and enforced.

"Ensuring that children complete secondary school is absolutely essential. However, simply changing the Act does not ensure this," he says.

"It doesn't identify, target and provide

resources for strategies aimed at those children who are at risk of dropping out of the system and being left behind; the very children who were likely to leave school early in the first place."

His comments come as Sydney research reveals the extent of anxiety felt by parents about their children's education.

University of Sydney researchers interviewed parents and found there is growing pressure to choose the right school for their children.

"Today, anxiety about a more dangerous world means that thinking about school choice can begin as soon as the child is born," Associate Professor Craig Campbell says.

"One of parents' most common concerns was to avoid schools which were seen as dominated by too many poor, badly behaved or ethnically alien children who threatened to overwhelm the special learning and social needs of 'my child'."

As a result of the new education age, Opposition Education spokesman David Pisoni is concerned class sizes could increase if more students remain at school. He also stressed the importance of the latter years of schooling and the need to ensure students who stay in the classroom are there to learn.

"Are we simply going to see 1200 17-year-

olds leaving school without a clear plan for the future (instead of 16-year-olds);" he says. "If that's the case all they (the Government) have done is delay the inevitable and disrupt kids who want to be at school."

Education Minister Jane Lomax-Smith says class sizes will not be affected.

"The more students we have in school the more teachers we have to employ," she says.

A further 20 "apprenticeship brokers" were working to match students with school-based apprenticeship places through 10 Trade Schools for the Future, Dr Lomax-Smith says.

The Government has allocated \$1.9 million for more than 60 programs which aim to keep students in school and boost their chances of attending university, securing a skilled job or entering a career in science and maths.

A further \$3 million is earmarked to train teachers who will implement the Future SACE, which will give more flexibility to students and, hopefully, encourage them to stick at their studies.

For students at high risk of dropping out there is the ICAN program, which provides case managers, training, career advice, home support and upskilling to such teenagers.

"We recognise some young people leave school because they don't want to follow an academic path but we want to give them flexibility and more options," Dr Lomax-Smith says.

"We're saying to them, 'Your options will be better in the future if you complete your SACE'. What's not acceptable is tenuous part-time employment with no ongoing training."

While Dr Lomax-Smith is confident a "cooperation and negotiation" approach will ensure students obey the compulsory education age, she says there are no "punitive" penalties outlined in the new legislation.

"We believe that it's very difficult for parents to force their children when they approach 17 years of age to do anything," she says. "We don't want to fine and coerce people, we want to have them be retained in education."