

# International Travel Report

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## Location of travel (travel destinations):

Harvard University, Cambridge MS, Washington DC, Houston TX, USA

## General statement of value of travel:

The objectives of this Westfield Premier's Education Scholarship were to:

1. Attend the Learning Differences Conference: Strategies for all Learners: RTI, Differentiated Instruction, and Beyond
2. Meet with other educators in schools in the United States to look at assessment practices and share information about differentiating the curriculum.
3. Discuss and share information with school leaders in a variety of settings and forums to discuss whole of school programs and initiatives.

One value of the travel was the opportunity to attend a 'Learning Differences' program in professional education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and being involved in sessions that emphasised the critical importance of the theory-to-practice cycle of knowledge. This program brought together educators from around the United States and beyond and was led by 3 distinguished faculty members, Professors Lynn Meltzer, Kurt Fischer, and Thomas Hehir. The opportunity to hear world class researchers, to speak individually to these leaders and practitioners as well as other participants was an outstanding opportunity to explore the latest work on differentiated instruction and methods for individualising the teaching process to meet the needs of a wide range of learners.

A second valuable outcome was visiting 4 schools and meeting a large number of key people in school leadership teams who talked about the initiatives they had undertaken related particularly to curriculum differentiation and best practice assessment. This provided a means of critically comparing, analysing and evaluating educational programs and student outcomes, as well as an opportunity to look at school leadership practices in several different settings. These experiences provided 'food for thought' as well as several important ideas to discuss with our curriculum leadership team at my own school, as well as several initiatives that could be gainfully pursued at several levels - through professional organisations and by reporting to the Department of Education. There is the potential for valuable outcomes for education at various levels in the State.

## Companies/organisations contacted:

The Harvard Graduate School of Education and The Research Institute for Learning and Development, Harvard GSE, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Thomas W. Pyle Middle School, Bethesda Maryland; Friendswood Junior High, Houston Tx., Zue S. Bales Intermediate School, Houston Tx; and the C. E. King High School, Houston Tx.

### **Outcomes of conference:**

Increased knowledge and understanding in the area of curriculum differentiation, student assessment and curriculum development.

### **Skills obtained:**

The conference attendance at Harvard allowed for a growth in understanding and new insights into the provision of learning and assessment strategies. However, in particular, Dr Rimes found the following ideas of particular relevance and importance:

1. The use of 'executive function' as a strategy for all students is worth pursuing. Dr Rimes believes there is scope for running professional learning in this area.
2. The issues surrounding the 'Responsiveness to Instruction' debate is worthy of discussion and teasing out by the Tasmanian education community.
3. The use of data to drive decision making at all levels of education was of great interest. All schools were impressive examples of using cohort, individual and group assessment data to drive curriculum change, and teaching.
4. The use of digital portfolios as reflective tools for observing, documenting and keeping track of learning is going to become a more important development in assessment in the future.
5. The regular and systematic use of focus groups for students by coordinating year group teacher at Pyle School was an impressive feature of school improvement. These student focus groups are used to measure teaching and school performance against agreed school goals.
6. At classroom level there was interesting work being done by teachers using interactive whiteboards and other forms of technology.
7. The current Australian debate surrounding national testing would benefit from detailed examination of the journey taken in the US. There are definitely many positive aspects of the standardised testing program, but at the same time concerns about the narrow focus that such testing tends to result in.

It should be noted that this brief summary of some excellent work observed in schools and conversations held with school officials. More detail can be found in the diary which accompanies this report.

### **Benefits to Tasmania:**

A detailed report from the study is provided. Opportunities to share the findings and outcomes will be sought, such as providing workshops and seminar programs for Tasmanian school leaders. It is believed that the findings and outcomes from this period of study and reflection could help school leaders in very practical and worthwhile ways. It would provide school leaders in government, independent and catholic schools with:

1. Consideration of findings which help teachers, schools and systems set content standards and standards of performance that bring greater focus to improving achievement;
2. Public policy, resources and accountability systems that reward schools for growth in the students they nurture;
3. Information to enable them to design, implement and evaluate high quality assessment systems that serve the needs of each student enrolled in schools and includes performance standards that can be measured along a stable

scale that measures growth across grades; consistent meaning across grades and across subject areas;

4. Measurement of school success that allows for identification of areas of concern and areas of strength - see for example, McCall, M.S., Kingsbury, G.C., & Olson, A. (2004) Individual Growth and School Success. Northwest Evaluation Association.

5. Information and feedback on the research findings from the Harvard study period, including information on RTI, Executive Function and Co-teaching strategies.

This brief report is a summary of the full report being provided to the Director, CELO, Department of Education. Dr Julie Rimes is extremely grateful for the opportunities provided by the Westfield Scholarship.

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