

Creating engaging schools for all children and young people: What works

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About

This paper was prepared by the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CFECFW), Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) and Hume Whittlesea Local Learning and Employment Network (HWLLEN).

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Overview

Putting school engagement back on the agenda

This report seeks to renew Victoria's interest and determination to improve school and student engagement in Victoria. The idea of creating engaging schools is not new, and despite there being Department of Education and Training (DET) guidelines in place,¹ not all Victorian schools have successfully created a culture that engages students. An estimated 10,000 young people drop out of education every year, and school expulsions and suspensions are rising, as YACVic notes in its recently released report *Out of sight, out of mind? Exclusion and inclusion of students in Victorian schools*.²

This report showcases positive practice examples of engaging schools, documenting the ways which leading schools engage children and young people. Our purpose is to share these experiences with all schools, families, government agencies and community organisations, so all children and young people can be engaged in their learning. The report identifies principles of good practice every school might adopt – along with system changes and assistance required from government for all Victorian children and young people to stay engaged at school.

This report was prepared by an alliance of community sector organisations including the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CFECFW), Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) and Hume Whittlesea Local Learning and Employment Network (HWLLEN).

We consulted with peak bodies, schools and community sector organisations, and reviewed evidence-based research. We identified the resources, skills and support for the adoption of good practice to occur and explore the community sector's collaborative role in schools. A series of case studies illustrate the approaches and characteristics of leading schools, and outline success factors and lessons learnt from trying new ways to engage.

Drawing from the practice case studies, we have summarised seven principles for establishing engaging schools. These form useful signposts and strategies school communities, community organisations and governments can adopt. The principles are:

1. Embrace diversity through creating an inclusive school culture
2. Provide vulnerable children and young people with additional, tailored assistance when required

¹ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Effective Schools are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines*, 2009.

² Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, *Out of sight, out of mind? Exclusion and inclusion of students in Victorian schools*, June 2016

3. Manage successful transitions from early childhood to primary school and from primary school to secondary school
4. Actively collaborate with families
5. Address the learning needs, strengths and interests of every child in every classroom
6. Focus on the whole child and young person to promote their wellbeing and social-emotional development
7. Work with the local community, including the community sector, other education providers, and businesses.

We have also identified system-wide structures and processes required to support good practice. These have implications for government, schools and CSOs. These include:

- Spending money where it's needed, to help students and schools facing disadvantage
- Working together across government and sharing information to meet students' holistic needs and inform policy and practice
- Creating and sustaining structures that support systemic change across Victorian schools.

DET can drive systemic change by guiding, monitoring and assisting Victorian schools to be 'engaging schools'. The Victorian Government's commitment to make Victoria the Education State and reduce the impact of disadvantage is a solid platform for this work, but wider cultural and structural changes are required so every child and young person can participate meaningfully in learning and school life.

Engaging schools foster motivation, inclusion and connection

'Engagement' refers to a student's enthusiasm, curiosity, involvement and excitement in learning. When children and young people are 'engaged', they learn faster and more comprehensively, and can more easily cope with setbacks and obstacles. In contrast, learning and wellbeing deteriorates if students are 'disengaged', by being bored, antagonistic, or apathetic.

The way schools operate, the school cultures they build, and the practices teachers, leaders, parents and community organisations use both inside and outside the classroom can influence student engagement. 'Engaging schools' are schools that have developed ways of positively influencing student engagement, so students not only perform better educationally, but are generally happier, healthier and feel connected to the people around them.

Our case studies show that engaging schools are welcoming, culturally safe, inclusive and enjoyable. They foster students' positive physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development by extending their unique talents. They tailor learning experiences to each student's individual needs and interests, and do not expect a 'one size fits all' approach to work. These schools 'never give up' on their students.

School engagement interacts with disadvantage

Our early years fundamentally shape our life chances. Gaps in capabilities appear early in life between children from disadvantaged families and their more advantaged peers, and can set a lower trajectory for education and life outcomes.³ Students from disadvantaged backgrounds can be up to three years behind their peers⁴ for many reasons outside of their control.

Children and young people more likely to face disadvantage include:

- children with disability and additional health and development needs
- children from families living in poverty
- children in out-of-home care and involved in the child protection system
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander⁵ children
- children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, particularly those not proficient in English, and including refugees and asylum seekers
- same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse (SSAIGD) young people
- children from rural and regional Victoria.

Around 23 per cent of young Victorians have not completed Year 12 or its equivalent by age 19.⁶ Early school leavers are at greater risk of financial hardship, physical and mental health problems, drug and alcohol misuse, homelessness, and involvement in the justice system.⁷ Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are over-represented among these early school leavers^{8,9}

Causes for school disengagement and poor educational trajectories are complex and should be considered in the context of the child and young person themselves, their home and other environments, and factors inside and outside school. Risk factors can include experiencing financial barriers, homelessness, learning difficulties, low academic performance, mental and physical health problems, family dysfunction, drug and alcohol problems, caring responsibilities, bullying, poor transitions from primary to secondary school, expulsion from school, parent disengagement, being ineligible for additional disability support, and lack of transport.^{10,11,12,13}

³ Australian Early Development Census, *Research Snapshot: The impact of socioeconomics and school readiness for life course educational trajectories*, ED14-0193, 2014.

⁴ S Thomson, L De Bortoli, M Nicolas, K Hillman and S Buckley, *Challenges for Australian education: Results from PISA 2009: The PISA 2009 assessment for students' reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, PISA national reports*, Australian Council for Education Research, Melbourne, 2011, p. xiv.

⁵ The term Aboriginal is used in this report to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

⁶ S Lamb, J Jackson, A Walstab and S Huo, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne, 2015, p. 42.

⁷ Deloitte Access Economics, *The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving*, prepared for Hands On Learning Australia, 2012.

⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

⁹ S Lamb, J Jackson, A Walstab and S Huo, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne, 2015,

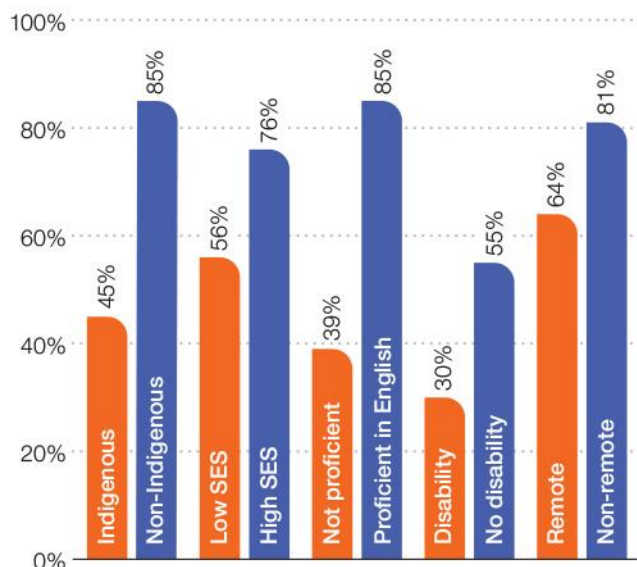
¹⁰ D Brown, G Mykonos and S Bond, *An analysis of the social and economic costs of early school exit*, prepared for the Need to Succeed Symposium, Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2015.

¹¹ Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections Consortium, *The Hume Under 16 Project Out of School - Out of Sight Final Report*, 2012, p.6.

¹² Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections Consortium, *The Whittlesea Under 16 Project*, 2012.

¹³ Inner Northern Youth Connections Consortium, *U16: Invisible & Ineligible: The Moreland Under 16 Project*, 2012.

Figure 1: Year 12 attainment by disadvantage category



Data source: Deloitte Access Economics, *The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving*, prepared for Hands On Learning Australia, 2012, Chart 2.6.

Engaged students learn better

For students to be fully engaged in learning and reach their educational potential, they need to be behaviorally, emotionally and cognitively engaged in school.¹⁴

When students are engaged, they learn better and achieve more in school and life.¹⁵ An engaged student thinks, acts and feels positively toward school and learning.^{16,17} This is more than merely attending school and not disrupting classes. Engaged students actively pursue and value learning, derive enjoyment and meaning from participating in school activities, and identify as part of their school community.^{18,19,20,21}

Disengagement can reduce a student's academic performance,²² confidence, wellbeing, and motivation. Disengaged students may become inattentive or disruptive during class, not participate in schoolwork, arrive late, skip classes or be frequently absent. Without intervention, students may leave school altogether.

¹⁴ L Ockenden, *Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people: Resource sheet no.33*, produced by Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australian Institute of Family Studies, Canberra, 2014, p.6.

¹⁵ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, [What works best: Evidence-based practices to help improve NSW student performance](#), NSW Department of Education and Communities, Sydney, 2014, p.23.

¹⁶ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, *Engagement in Australian schools*, AITSL, Melbourne, 2013.

¹⁷ J D Willms, *Student engagement at school: a sense of belonging and participation results from PISA 2000*, OECD, 2003.

¹⁸ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, op. cit..

¹⁹ J D Willms, op. cit.

²⁰ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, op. cit..

²¹ L Ockenden, op. cit.

²² M Angus, T McDonald, C Ormond, C Rybarcyk, A Taylor and A Winterton, *Trajectories of classroom behaviour and academic progress: A study of student engagement with learning*, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, 2009, pp. 33

Signs of disengagement may emerge as early as the first years of primary school,²³ with students arriving late and patterns of irregular school attendance developing from Grade 1.^{24,25,26} The number of students who disengage entirely from school steadily increases with age, peaking at ages 14 to 15, though with some children leaving as early as 11 years old.^{27,28,29}

Students displaying unproductive behaviours or signs of disengagement are often labelled as a 'problem', without considering their school and family context.³⁰ School-based factors such as the suitability of lesson content and teaching practice are frequently overlooked. Risk and protective factors exist across the entire spectrum of children and young people's environments, therefore actions to increase school engagement should span all these levels.

Many children disengage because school structures, systems and training have not provided the flexibility, resources and expertise to address the determinants and impacts of disadvantage.

If Victoria's schools better met the needs of every child and young person, student engagement in learning and wellbeing would improve and the rates of early school leaving could be significantly reduced. All Victorian children and young people have a right to access high quality education. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that signatories, including Australia, should take measures to encourage regular attendance at school and reduce early school leaving.³¹ Completing education leads to better labour market outcomes, better health, improved life satisfaction, enhanced civic and social engagement and reduced offending.³²

²³ S J Crump and R Slee, *School transitions for vulnerable young people: Re-engaging students through local initiatives*, The Victorian Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning, Melbourne, 2015.

²⁴ Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections Consortium, *The Hume Under 16 Project*. op. cit.

²⁵ Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections Consortium, *The Whittlesea Under 16 Project*. op. cit.

²⁶ Inner Northern Youth Connections Consortium, op. cit.

²⁷ Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections Consortium, *The Hume Under 16 Project*. op. cit.

²⁸ Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections Consortium, *The Whittlesea Under 16 Project*. op. cit.

²⁹ Inner Northern Youth Connections Consortium, op. cit.

³⁰ A M Sullivan, B Johnson, L Owens and R Conway, 'Punish them or engage them? Teachers' views of unproductive student behaviours in the classroom', *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 39 (6), 2014.

³¹ United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 28.

³² R McLachlan, G Gilfillan and J Gordon, op. cit, p. 109.

Principles for school engagement

Principle 1: Embrace diversity with an inclusive culture

Schools can enhance education outcomes, health and wellbeing of children and young people by providing a safe school environment that embraces diversity and makes everyone feel welcome. This requires creating a school culture that is respectful, tolerant, culturally safe and inclusive of all children and young people, both inside and outside the classroom. Particular attention is required for children and young people who are more likely to face exclusion, including children with disability, SSAIGD young people, children experiencing poverty, children in out-of-home care, Aboriginal children and those from CALD backgrounds, particularly refugees and asylum seekers.

What works?

Lead an inclusive culture

Engaging schools have strong leaders able to articulate inclusive school values, set expectations and hold staff accountable to these aspirations. These leaders persist in transforming their school culture, despite change often taking many years.³³ An engaging school requires consultative, transparent and persistent leadership willing to disrupt 'business as usual'.³⁴ Only when change is embedded in a strong inclusive culture are gains sustainable.

Engaging schools' culture generates a sense of belonging. They are welcoming, interested in the lives of their students, and look outwards to the communities they serve. They use their knowledge of each individual student's interests and desires to build on their strengths and motivate their learning. Staff feel responsible to provide tailored instruction to each student. They notice when students are struggling, and offer reassurance and assistance to help them navigate difficulties.

Setting the school culture from the top is essential. Engaging schools bring together the different actions they take to include and support their students. Becoming an engaging school is more than adopting individual measures in isolation. It relies on school leaders sharing their commitment to a clear vision to drive coordinated change, with different interventions becoming mutually reinforcing.^{35,36}

³³ Education Review Office, *Towards equitable outcomes in secondary schools: Good practice*, New Zealand, May 2014.

³⁴ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, *High values-add schools: key drivers of school improvement*, NSW Department of Education and Communities, Sydney, 2015.

³⁵ S Lamb and S Rice, *Effective Intervention Strategies for Students at Risk of Early Leaving: Discussion Paper*, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, the University of Melbourne, 2008.

³⁶ Education Review Office, op. cit.

Schools may develop inclusive cultures by:

- Placing a high priority on understanding each student and tailoring learning to their unique capabilities^{37,38}
- Fostering high aspirations by believing every student will succeed^{39,40,41,42}
- Attending to each student's holistic development, with a focus on their social and emotional health and wellbeing as well as their educational attainment^{43,44}
- Expending time and energy to build rapport with their students^{45, 46}
- Understanding and responding to students' diverse needs, strengths and circumstances, including the social difficulties they face such as mental health conditions, disability, poverty, living in out-of-home care and trauma^{47,48}
- Being outward-looking and collaborative through inviting families, community services, other education providers, local businesses, and the wider community to participate in school life and work together to help students succeed.^{49,50}

Maryborough Education Centre⁵¹ – changing the culture

Maryborough Education Centre is a Prep to year 12 school, located in one of the most disadvantaged communities in the state, with high numbers of students who have experienced trauma and have additional health and development needs. The school faced major issues including poor student behaviour, dissatisfaction among teaching staff and parents, and a lack of confidence among the broader community. In response, its leadership team has worked hard over eight years to change the culture of the school to create a positive, respectful and inclusive environment that supports every student.

The school developed a shared vision that holds high expectations for every student and a commitment to enhancing the learning, development and wellbeing of every child and young person, with the philosophy 'we'll find a way'. This includes understanding the whole student and trying to remove the substantial barriers many of students face to engaging in school.

³⁷ G N Masters, *Teaching and Learning School Improvement Framework*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Queensland, 2010.

³⁸ Australian Council for Educational Research, *ACER eNews 02 February 2004*, ACER, 2004.

³⁹ S Lamb and S Rice, op. cit.

⁴⁰ Education Review Office, op. cit.

⁴¹ T Dreise, G Milgate, B Perrett and T Meston, *Indigenous school attendance: Creating expectations that are 'really high' and 'highly real'*, Australian Council for Educational Research, March 2016.

⁴² G N Masters, op. cit.

⁴³ Public Health England, *The link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment: A briefing for head teachers, governors and staff in education settings*, London, 2014.

⁴⁴ T Bentley and C Cazaly, *The shared work of learning: Lifting educational achievement through collaboration*, Mitchell Institute research report No. 01/2015, Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy and the Centre for Strategic Education, Melbourne, 2015, p. 50.

⁴⁵ Education Review Office, op. cit.

⁴⁶ L Randal, L Morstyn and K Walsh, *Two way street: Young people informing improvements to schools and youth services*, YACVic, Melbourne, October 2012.

⁴⁷ L Campbell, M McGuire and C Stockley, *I Just Want to Go to School: Voices of Young People Experiencing Educational Disadvantage*, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Jesuit Social Services and MacKillop Family Services, 2012.

⁴⁸ L Randal, L Morstyn and K Walsh, op. cit.

⁴⁹ T Bentley and C Cazaly, op. cit.

⁵⁰ Education Review Office, op. cit.

⁵¹ Maryborough Education Centre, <http://www.maryborougheducationcentre.vic.edu.au/>, accessed 12 June 2016.

For example if a student is late to school, the first response from staff is 'welcome' rather than asking why or punishing them. The school offers to transport students to school, and provides breakfast and uniforms to those who require assistance. A teaching and learning model was developed to provide tailored teaching instruction that accommodates every student.

The school actively fosters positive connections between students and their peers and teachers. Timetabling was amended so teachers can work more closely with groups of students rather than being spread across the school. A values program was built into the curriculum to improve socialisation skills and promote positive, respectful relationships.

Changes were made to provide a calm and safe learning environment, both inside and outside the classroom. For example, trauma informed training was provided to all staff and the school has a policy of no raised voices or sarcasm for both students and staff. This is supported by a School-wide Positive Behaviour Support Framework (SWPBS).

The school reports it still has a long way to go, but has seen substantial positive change. They report that overall, students are happy and feel connected to their peers and school, parents report high levels of satisfaction and community perceptions of the school are positive.

Key elements of success and lessons learnt:

- Setting a clear vision and well defined expectations for the school and all staff. This is supported by shared lesson planning, having the agreed teaching and learning model and implementing the SWPBS framework. Regular meetings are held with the leadership team and other staff to identify and implement changes.
- Committing to consistent practice and agreed processes from all staff at all times. The school has high expectations of adult behaviour and staff hold each other to account.
- Selecting the right staff. Staff require the 'mind' (skills) and 'heart' (commitment and understanding) to foster students' learning and wellbeing.
- Providing staff with regular professional development that aligns with the school's vision, including Calmer Classrooms training and the Berry Street Education Model and being part of 'the University Of Melbourne Network Of Schools'.
- Working collaboratively with the whole school community. Through the Go Goldfields Alliance the school works in partnership with community sector agencies, education services and the local council to address outside school factors influencing student engagement and wellbeing, including early learning opportunities.
- Having strong leadership and a genuine commitment to making these changes. It takes a long time and concerted effort to create cultural change.

Foster cultural safety and pride

Making schools culturally safe and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people and those from CALD backgrounds helps foster their wellbeing and sense of belonging. Engaging schools develop the cultural competency of staff and teachers to better support students from CALD backgrounds, including refugees and asylum seekers, who may have experienced a disrupted education as well as significant trauma.⁵² They implement strategies to welcome and actively engage families from migrant and refugee backgrounds.⁵³ They also provide tailored assistance for CALD students, such as peer mentoring, English literacy programs, and opportunities for students from different cultural backgrounds to engage with their school peers.⁵⁴

For Aboriginal children and young people, fostering a positive sense of Aboriginal identity is crucial to student learning and engagement.⁵⁵ Schools can implement a range of strategies to promote understanding and respect for Aboriginal histories, cultures and languages so that Aboriginal students and their families feel welcome and valued. For instance:

- Visibly recognising Aboriginal culture throughout the school, such as by displaying flags and artwork
- Providing a curriculum that is culturally responsible and includes Aboriginal perspectives
- Teaching an Aboriginal language
- Valuing the input of Aboriginal Workers, such as Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs) and employing Aboriginal teachers
- Engaging meaningfully with the local Aboriginal community and elders, such as seeking their input into setting of school policy and priorities, and curriculum.^{56,57}

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI) has worked with schools, Koorie communities and the DET to develop Koorie School-Community Partnership Agreements.⁵⁸ These agreements are a formal commitment between a school, parents/caregivers and their local Aboriginal community to work together to build a culturally inclusive environment and improve the engagement, wellbeing and educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. The agreement outlines the respective rights and responsibilities of each party and how they will work together. A Koorie Parent and Community Engagement Model⁵⁹ helps schools and communities implement and adapt Koorie School-Community Partnership Agreements to suit their community. VAEAI, in partnership

⁵² Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA), *Better beginnings. Better futures. Improving Outcomes for New and Emerging Communities*, FECCA, 2014pp. 5-6.

⁵³ Centre for Multicultural Youth, [Opening the school gate: Engaging migrant and refugee families](#), CMY, Melbourne, 2015.

⁵⁴ Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia, op. cit.

⁵⁵ L Ockenden, op. cit.

⁵⁶ M Lonsdale, *Making a difference: Improving outcomes for Indigenous Learners*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne, 2013.

⁵⁷ L Ockenden, op. cit.

⁵⁸ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc, *School-Community Partnership Agreements*, VAEAI, <http://www.vaeai.org.au/news-and-events/tx-articles.cfm?loadref=53&id=16>, accessed 23 May 2016.

⁵⁹ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc, *Koorie School-Community Partnerships Agreements: the Koorie Parent and Community Engagement Model*, VAEAI, Northcote, 2014.

with the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority and the DET have also developed a Victorian Koorie Languages Schools Program and pilot trial.⁶⁰

The recently released *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan* sets out a 10 year vision and associated actions to improve the learning, development and wellbeing for Aboriginal children and young people.⁶¹ The plan was developed by DET, VAEAI, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation.

Thornbury Primary School – embracing Koorie culture⁶²

Thornbury Primary has a high proportion of Aboriginal students and a long history of working with Aboriginal students and incorporating Aboriginal culture. It is seen as a 'school of choice' by many Koorie families because of its inclusive culture.⁶³ Key initiatives include:

- Implementing a School-Community Partnership Agreement with the assistance of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc (VAEAI) to strengthen relationships between the school and Koorie community.
- Delivering an Indigenous Studies program and the Woiwurrung Language and Culture Program as a formal Language other than English (LOTE) program.
- Visibly recognising Aboriginal culture with Koorie images, expressions and messages, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags and local artworks throughout the school.
- Celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and leadership such as through NAIDOC week, Reconciliation week and Sorry Day events and regular acknowledgement of country at weekly assemblies and community events.

Include and provide more help for students with additional health and development needs

Around 20 per cent of students have additional health and development needs.⁶⁴ This includes children and young people who have, or are at, increased risk of a chronic physical, developmental, behavioural or emotional condition.⁶⁵ To help students with additional health and development needs reach their potential, schools require inclusive policies and practices that accommodate all children and young people.⁶⁶ This encompasses:

⁶⁰ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc, *Victorian Koorie Languages in Schools Program*, <http://www.vaeai.org.au/support/dsp-default.cfm?loadref=143>, accessed 23 May 2016.

⁶¹ Department of Education and Training, *Murrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*, Department of Education and Training, Melbourne, 2016.

⁶² Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc, *VAEAI Case Studies 2014*, VAEAI 2014.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ S Goldfeld, M O'Connor, M Sayers, T Moore, F Oberklaid, 'Prevalence and correlates of special health care needs in a population cohort of Australian children at school entry', *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 2012;33(4):319-327.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), *Inclusive education for students with disability: A review of the best evidence in relation to theory and practice*, prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, ARACY, 2013.

- Fostering a positive culture towards students with disability so they feel accepted by their peers, form friendships and develop a sense of connectedness to the school⁶⁷
- Implementing policies and practices that promote meaningful participation in the classroom and all aspects of school life, such as excursions and school sports days
- Having the capacity and expertise to implement evidence-based practices that assist students with disability in the classroom, such as the delivery of Universal Design for Learning,⁶⁸ using assistive technologies and individual learning plans.⁶⁹ A comprehensive range of classroom practices are detailed ARACY's review of the best evidence in inclusive education.⁷⁰
- Providing physical environments that accommodate all learners, such as having quiet areas for students with different sensory requirements, and 'wriggle cushions' or 'move 'n sit' cushions for students who need to be able to move around more to remain engaged
- Adopting universal design principles in any building work so all students with disability and mobility issues can access school grounds, buildings and facilities.

In addition to inclusive learning environments, some students may require extra support to fulfill their educational potential, particularly those who face multiple forms of disadvantage which can create a potential "double jeopardy" for them.⁷¹ For example, students may require assistance from specialists such as occupational therapists, behavioural analysts and speech pathologists.

Targeted professional development and access to experienced mentors and supervisors can also help teachers deliver evidence-based practices. DET's operational guidelines can be strengthened to clearly inform schools about the evidence of best practice, along with what is acceptable and unacceptable practice. Stakeholders raise concerns about the segregation of students with disability into specialist schools. Equipping mainstream schools and teachers to better support students with additional health and development needs could help alleviate this.

Keep students safe and happy

Providing an emotionally and physically safe school environment helps students develop positive connections to peers and teachers, promotes their health and wellbeing and enables learning to occur. Young people identify that bullying and violence at school affects their engagement and

⁶⁷S Robinson and J Truscott, *Belonging and connection of school students with disability*, Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University and Children with a Disability Australia, Victoria, 2014.

⁶⁸ National Centre on Universal Design for Learning, *The concept of UDL*, <http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udldefined>, accessed 12 June 2016.

⁶⁹Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, op. cit.

⁷⁰Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, op.cit.

⁷¹ Ibid.

enjoyment.⁷² Stakeholders call for better bullying and violence prevention strategies, with strong endorsement for initiatives such as the Safe Schools Coalition.

Safe Schools Coalition⁷³ – making schools safe

This is a national coalition dedicated to helping schools eradicate bullying and become safer, and more inclusive for SSAIGD students, school staff and families. Membership is free and available to Australian schools across all sectors. Joining the coalition represents a commitment from the school to making their school community safe and free from homophobic and transphobic bullying and discrimination. Safe Schools is an evidence-based program, which provides schools with professional development, staff and student audits, resources, tailored assistance and guidance around specific issues. Membership has now grown to 279 schools in Victoria,⁷⁴ including many of the schools profiled in this report. Safe Schools Coalition has been profiled in a recent UNESCO report on bullying, violence and discrimination.⁷⁵

Stakeholders also emphasise the value of promoting positive student behaviours and respectful relationships among students and staff. A number of schools highlight the benefits of the School-wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS),⁷⁶ an evidence-based framework. Stakeholders also welcome the investment to expand Respectful Relationships Education into all schools, to help promote equal and healthy relationships between young men and women.⁷⁷ To be most effective, the rollout requires a sustained commitment from government and continue to be informed by evidence of best practice as identified by the Respectful Relationships Education in Schools (RREiS) project evaluation.⁷⁸

Principle 2: Give vulnerable children and young people extra help

Targeted interventions provide additional assistance to children and young people facing disadvantage or who are at greater risk of disengagement. Effective initiatives include mentoring, early intervention/tuition for those who are falling behind academically, additional support for children with disability, wrap-around services and case management.^{79, 80, 81}

⁷² L Campbell, et al., op. cit.

⁷³ Safe Schools Coalition Australia, *Who we are*, <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au/who-we-are>, accessed 18 May 2016.

⁷⁴ Safe Schools Coalition Victoria, <https://sscv.org.au/>, accessed 2 Nov 2016.

⁷⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *From insult to inclusion: Asia-Pacific report on school bullying, violence and discrimination of the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity*, UNESCO, 2015.

⁷⁶ Department of Education and Training, *Whole School Engagement Strategies and Supports*, <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/wholeschoolengage.aspx>, accessed on 25 May 2016.

⁷⁷ Department of Education and Training, *Respectful Relationships*, <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/health/Pages/respectfulrelationships.aspx>

⁷⁸ Our Watch, *Respectful Relationships Education In Schools: The Beginnings of Change Final Evaluation Report*, Prepared for Department of Premier and Cabinet and Department of Education and Training, Victoria, Our Watch, 2016.

⁷⁹ S Lamb and S Rice, op. cit.

⁸⁰ S Higgins, M Katsipataki, R Coleman, P Henderson, L E Major, and R Coe, *The Australian Teaching and Learning Toolkit*, Education Endowment Foundation, London, February 2015.

⁸¹ Centre for Community Child Health, The Royal Children's Hospital, *Policy Brief No. 10: Rethinking school readiness*, Melbourne, 2008.

What works?

Build aspirations by mentoring

Access to mentoring programs, including peer mentoring and role modeling, can improve school engagement, build aspirations and prevent early school leaving, particularly among students facing disadvantage.⁸² This includes children and young people in out-of-home-care,⁸³ children from CALD backgrounds⁸⁴, children from rural and low socioeconomic areas⁸⁵ and Aboriginal children.⁸⁶

Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME)⁸⁷ – transitioning from school

AIME engages with Indigenous students in Years 9-12 to improve their skills, opportunities and confidence to complete school and transition well to post-school education, training or employment. It also seeks to raise the aspirations held by teachers and parents about Indigenous students and strengthen links between universities and secondary schools.

AIME is a highly structured educational mentoring program which matches secondary students (mentees) to university students (mentors), overseen by program coordinators. It delivers a Core Program for school students who can visit an AIME partner university campus, and an Outreach Program for students living further away.

In 2014, 93 per cent of AIME students completed Year 12 and 76 per cent transitioned into positive post-school pathways, substantially higher than national Indigenous rates.⁸⁸ For every \$1 spent on the AIME program, \$7 in benefits are generated for the economy.⁸⁹

Key elements of success and lessons learnt:

- Developing strong partnerships with the local community.
- Prioritising cultural safety and tailored programs.
- Establishing long-term mentoring relationships, with additional broader mentoring support provided through program coordinators and other AIME staff.
- Undertaking careful recruitment of mentors and staff, combined with extensive, ongoing training and guidance to mentors.

⁸² S Lamb and S Rice, op. cit.

⁸³ A Harvey, P McNamara, L Andrewartha, M Luckman, *Out of care, into university: Raising higher education access and achievement of care leavers*, La Trobe University, Melbourne 2015.p. viii.

⁸⁴ Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia, *Better beginnings, Better futures: Improving outcomes for new and emerging communities*, FECCA, 2014, pp. 5-6.

⁸⁵ Curtis D, Drummond A, Halsey J and Lawson M, *Peer-mentoring of students in rural and low socioeconomic status schools: increasing aspirations for higher education*, NCVER, Adelaide, 2012, p. 25.

⁸⁶ S Helme and S Lamb, *Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students: Resource sheet no. 6 for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011.

⁸⁷ Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience Indigenous Corporation, *About AIME*, <https://aimementoring.com/about/aimel/>, accessed 07 June 2016.

⁸⁸ Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience, *Impact of AIME to date*, <https://aimementoring.com/about/aimel/>, accessed 2 June 2015.

⁸⁹ KPMG, *Economic evaluation of the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience program: Final report: Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience*, December 2013, p.3.

- Having a highly structured format to ensure quality and consistency of program delivery, with a strong emphasis on monitoring and continuous improvement.⁹⁰

Address skills gaps with targeted interventions

Providing targeted, early interventions to children and young people who are developmentally vulnerable or experiencing poor educational outcomes increases school engagement and achievement.^{91,92} Proactive measures to build students' skills and improve their learning are most effective if they are provided when performance issues are first identified. Stakeholders and the literature identify many valuable initiatives delivered both within and outside of school hours, either for individuals or groups of students. Frequently cited examples include:

- one-on-one tutoring with teachers or adult volunteers
- peer-tutoring
- homework clubs
- early intervention for literacy and numeracy
- small group tuition
- teaching assistants.

The most effective approach depends on each student's circumstances and skill gaps.

Dandenong North Primary School⁹³ – building skills in teachers and students

Approximately 90 per cent of students at Dandenong North Primary School are from non-English speaking backgrounds,⁹⁴ with around 20 per cent from refugee backgrounds. Many families also face economic disadvantage.

The school developed a comprehensive professional development program 'IMOCAD' – Induction, Mentoring, Observation, Coaching, Appraisal and Development – to build the expertise of all teaching staff and accelerate the learning of graduate teachers.⁹⁵

The program is embedded across the school, with 39 teachers acting as trained coaches. Staff regularly receive professional development and weekly staff meetings are held to share good practice and promote consistency across the school.

Given the large cohort of students with low or no English language skills, many targeted interventions focus on language and literacy. One key intervention is the 'Reading Intervention Program' to provide intensive one-on-one literacy assistance, as the number of students requiring assistance (approximately 140) was too high for more conventional

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ S Lamb and S Rice, op. cit.

⁹² S Higgins, et al., op. cit.

⁹³ Dandenong North Primary School, <http://www.dandenongnorthps.vic.edu.au/>, accessed 2 June 2015.

⁹⁴ My School, Dandenong North Primary School, Dandenong, <https://www.myschool.edu.au/SchoolProfile/Index/97450/DandenongNorthPrimarySchool/44811/2015>, accessed 2 June 2015.

⁹⁵ Social Ventures Australia, Dandenong North Primary School, <http://www.socialventures.com.au/work/sva-bright-spots-schools-connection/powerhouseschools/dandenongnorth/>, accessed 2 June 2015.

programs, such as Reading Recovery. It is run by trained teachers assisted by trained volunteers, including parents at the school.

Targeted programs run throughout the year alongside regular classes. There are no set timeframes and students move in and out of programs as required. As a result, no two students are likely to have the same timetable.

EAL funding is used to provide intensive support to students outside of their regular classroom. Three streams of assistance are provided ('New Arrivals Program', 'Transition' and 'EAL') by specialist teachers with the assistance of multicultural aides.

A 'Reception Program' runs from terms 2-4 to ease the transition for students enrolling after first term. New students go into a dedicated class with a teacher who inducts them into the school environment and engages with their families. This helps settle them into the school in a secure and nurturing environment and also reduces 'down time' for other teachers.

Children and families are actively engaged in the school and are excited to learn. Academically, the school performs well compared with all Australian schools and well above average compared with schools experiencing similar levels of disadvantage.⁹⁶

Key elements of success and lessons learnt:

- Starting small with new initiatives then scaling up when they prove successful. The school began with only one EAL teacher and one Reading Recovery teacher. Any school with EAL funding or equity funding could implement this on a small scale.
- Regularly monitoring program and student outcomes, to determine if programs are effective and to drive continuous improvement.
- Tailoring interventions to meet the needs of students. Existing programs were not suitable, so the school developed its own programs.
- Ensuring regular classroom teachers are well equipped to enhance the learning of all students so they complement, but do not rely on, targeted interventions. There is a focus on explicit teaching and purposeful teaching of language and literacy in every classroom, supported by regular professional development.
- Being open to flexible timetabling. Classroom teachers took time to adjust to students coming in and out of their classes to engage in intervention or extension programs, but have embraced the concept after seeing the enormous benefits.

Coordinate holistic support for students facing disadvantage

Vulnerable children and families often face multiple and complex problems that create barriers to school engagement. They may include personal barriers, such as mental or physical health issues; family circumstances, such as poverty, homelessness, caring responsibilities, living in out-of-home

⁹⁶ My School, *Dandenong North Primary School, Dandenong*, <https://www.myschool.edu.au/SimilarSchools/Index/97450/DandenongNorthPrimarySchool/44811/2015>, accessed 2 June 2015.

care or low levels of parental education; and community-based barriers such as having limited access to supports and services. Providing coordinated, holistic wrap-around services, including case management, for vulnerable students can help them remain engaged in school and enhance their learning and wellbeing.^{97,98} It also delivers good returns on investment.⁹⁹

Principle 3: Manage successful transitions

Children and young people require assistance to successfully transition between key education stages, as this can be a challenging time, particularly for vulnerable children. Poor transitions can result in low educational attainment and can place children and young people at risk of disengaging from school.¹⁰⁰ Some students, including Aboriginal children, boys, children with disability, and children from low socioeconomic families, are more likely to experience poor transition and therefore require greater assistance.¹⁰¹ Children with negative experiences of primary school are more likely to face difficulties transitioning to secondary school.¹⁰²

What works?

Ease the path to primary school

Stakeholders identify several strategies to enhance transition from early childhood education and care (ECEC) into primary school. This includes better information sharing between ECEC providers and schools, so learning and development needs are understood before children start school, and support can be in place at the outset. Stakeholders report inconsistencies in the information early childhood educators include in transition plans, and how well it is used by schools. A reliance on families to pass on the information can also be problematic.

The department's Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework provides guidance for supporting children's transitions from early education to the primary school setting and emphasises the roles professionals can play to help build the social and emotional skills and strategies of children to manage transitions, including:

- Listening to children's views and involving them in planning transitions
- Promoting learning opportunities in transitions by recognising children's interests, cultures and abilities and building on these in meaningful ways
- Making use of structured assessments, such as the Transition Learning and Development Statement.

⁹⁷ C A Jones, *Uplifting the whole child: Using wraparound services to overcome social barriers to learning*, Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, 2014.

⁹⁸ S Lamb and S Rice, op. cit.

⁹⁹ A B Bowden, C R Belfield, H M Levin, R Shand, A Wang and M Morales, *A benefit-cost analysis of city connects*, Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education Teachers College, Columbia University, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Education Transitions*, Victoria, 2015.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² B Maguire and M Yu, 'Transition to secondary school', [LSAC Annual Statistical Report 2014](#), Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015.

Other strategies include increasing collaboration and alignment between early childhood educators and Prep teachers, to develop a shared understanding of pedagogy and practices.¹⁰³ This could include developing common curriculum frameworks and co-teaching arrangements. For example, there may be opportunities to incorporate play-based learning into Prep.

Providing opportunities for young children and their families to familiarise themselves with the school environment and building children's skills and confidence to manage the transition can also help. There may be opportunities to build the capacity of early childhood educators to support children and their families in this process. This can be strengthened by creating more family-friendly spaces, where families can informally meet staff and other families, along with integrating early years services with schools, such as through community hub models.¹⁰⁴

Whittington Primary School¹⁰⁵ – Improving transitions into primary school

Whittington Primary School is located in a highly disadvantaged community, with very limited local services, intergenerational poverty and high rates of vulnerability among Prep students. In 2012, the school had low parent engagement levels, with many families holding negative attitudes towards schooling. There were also significant behavioural issues among children and frequent suspensions. In 2013 the school introduced a number of initiatives to improve student learning and wellbeing. It focused on:

- Increasing connections with the broader community, including early childhood education and care, health and community services, philanthropic organisations, local businesses and the broader school community, with a particular focus on increasing parent/family engagement with the school.
- Improving student's literacy skills.
- Improving behaviour management to create positive learning environments.

The school created a classroom space for use by early childhood services, including kindergarten, playgroups and childcare. Pre-school children and their parents are invited to school events, such as drama and music performances, to help children familiarise themselves with the school environment and help parents develop more positive attitudes towards school.

The school continues to offer a warm, welcoming environment for all families (including parents, older siblings, aunties, uncles and grandparents) after children start school, with an open arts session every week, parent days, and free BBQs and coffee vans. Providing a fulltime social worker, who is trusted and available for children and families at any time, helps build positive relationships with families and help them access additional support.

As part of a school-wide approach to literacy improvement, a specialist literacy teacher provides targeted assistance to three to four students at a time, on a 10 week rotation. Due

¹⁰³ Centre for Community Child Health, The Royal Children's Hospital, *Rethinking the transition to school: Linking schools and early years services*, N0.11, Parkville, 2008.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Whittington Primary School, <http://www.whittingtonps.vic.edu.au/>, accessed 27 May 2016.

to low literacy levels of many parents, volunteers from a local business and the Lions club are paired with a student to undertake an hour of reading on a weekly basis.

The Schoolwide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) framework was introduced to promote agreed values of respect, responsibility and safety within the school. It is complemented by parent days where parents engage with their children on interactive activities, such as making board games and posters, around these behaviours. In response to parent feedback, the school provided every child with a simple one page matrix they could take home to continue these positive behaviours outside of school.

Whittington Primary is also one of eight Linking Learning pilot projects funded by the State Government. The project helps to strengthen relationships between ECEC, schools and other services; increase awareness about how to assist vulnerable children and families; and introduce a much needed Maternal and Child Health service within the community.

As a result, parent involvement in the school, student behaviour in the classroom and school grounds, and literacy and numeracy levels have improved¹⁰⁶ dramatically.

Key elements of success and lessons learnt:

- Having an in-depth understanding of the school community and working with it to develop strategies/initiatives. The social worker proactively engages with families, for example contacting them when students are late to school, and uses these opportunities to help identify the issues they are facing and address them.
- Seeking alternative funding to create more opportunities for the school community. For example, philanthropic funding has enabled the school to employ a full time social worker, an assistant principal and a kitchen hand to help provide all children with free lunches. Free drama and music programs are funded to provide children with more opportunities and increase their aspirations.
- Working in partnership with other organisations to build connections and provide a broader range of programs and services. The school recently received building funding and is hoping to develop a 'school-community hub' to further enhance connections between services to better assist children and families.

Create smooth transitions to secondary school

The 'middle years', in late primary school and early secondary school, is a period of significant physical, socio-emotional and developmental change.¹⁰⁷ Children can experience difficulties adjusting to the transition between the often smaller and secure, relational-based environment of primary school to the larger, more complex environment of secondary school.¹⁰⁸ Many children experience a drop in educational achievement and school engagement in the years following this

¹⁰⁶ My School Website, *Whittington Primary School, Whittington*, <https://www.myschool.edu.au/ResultsInNumbers/Index/97661/WhittingtonPrimarySchool/45030/2015>, accessed 10 June 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), *Building the scaffolding: strengthening support for young people in Victoria*, Melbourne, 2013.

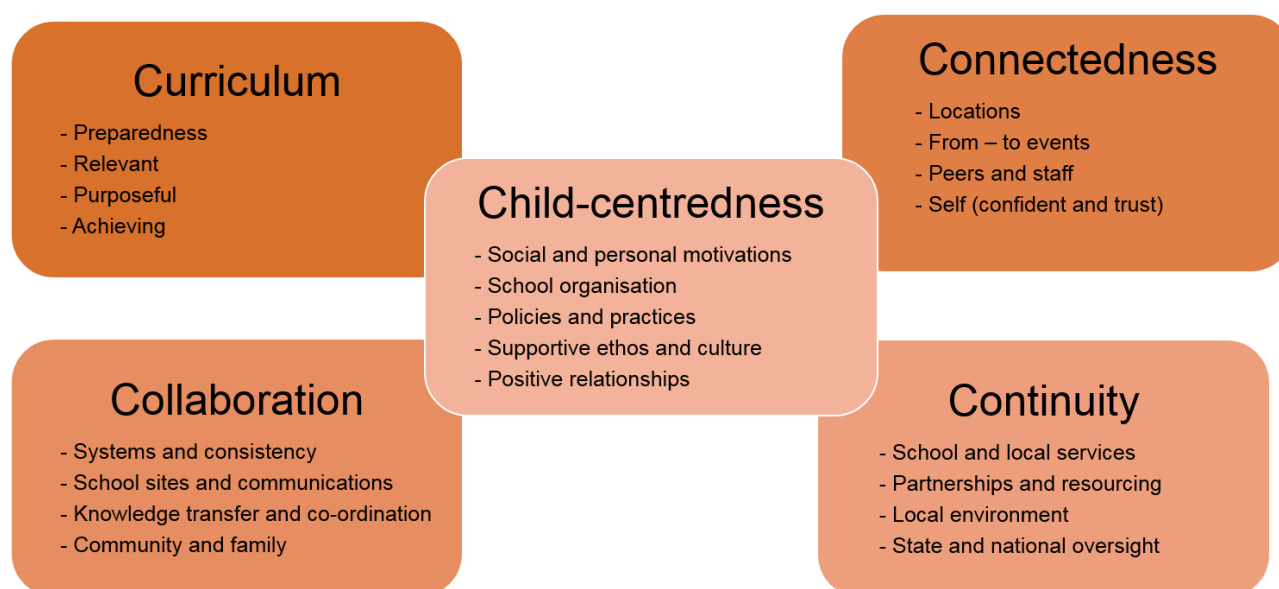
¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

transition.¹⁰⁹ If not addressed, the effect can be cumulative, leading to poor educational attainment and possible disengagement from secondary school.

While Victoria has an early years transition framework for students moving from kindergarten to primary school, there is no a comprehensive strategy for promoting successful transitions to secondary school that can help identify and respond to early warning signs of disengagement. There are good examples of transition programs, but these are inconsistent across the state. Stakeholders report that too often transition plans focus narrowly on the weeks either side of the transition rather than spanning the full year before and after.

Developing comprehensive ‘middle years’ transition plans for all students moving from primary to secondary school, would better support young people and help identify and respond to any early warning signs of disengagement. A 5C Transition Framework¹¹⁰ has been developed by the Victoria Institute, in partnership with School Focused Youth Services in the City of Stonnington Glen Eira and Port Phillip to help schools and communities assess their current practice and to guide the development of local transition plans. These broad headings serve as a guide and allow sufficient flexibility to tailor transition plans to meet the local context.

Figure 2: 5C Transition Framework – Action and Audit Guide



Source: S J Crump and R Slee, *School transitions for vulnerable young people: Re-engaging students through local initiatives*, The Victorian Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning, Melbourne, 2015, p.33.

Roxburgh College¹¹¹ – Improving secondary school transitions for students at risk

In addition to broader transition programs for all students, Roxburgh College runs a targeted ‘Getting ready for Roxy’ program for the transition from primary school. The College works

¹⁰⁹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Education Transitions*, op. cit.

¹¹⁰ S J Crump and R Slee, op. cit.

¹¹¹ Roxburgh College, <http://roxburghcollege.vic.edu.au/>, accessed 28 July 2016.

with four feeder primary schools to identify Grade 6 students at risk of poor transition, such as those with low attendance, low academic progress and behavioural issues, and students with additional health and development needs. A broad range of factors are considered including socioeconomic disadvantage and experiences of trauma and family dysfunction. The program aims to improve school attendance, engagement and wellbeing.

The feeder schools invite these students and their families to be part of the transition program in term 3 or 4. Each primary mentee is assigned a Year 9 mentor and they visit each other's schools. This mentoring relationship continues once the student enters Year 7, with regular catch-ups at lunch time.

Mentors receive thorough training, including a full-year elective that provides them with information and skills including how to broker conversations and protocols for managing difficult situations such as if a student discloses mental health issues and suicidal ideation.

Mentees are also assigned an adult mentor (retired educators with experience in welfare) in Grade 6. The program also engages parents. Additional assistance is provided to students where required, such as those with learning disability or low literacy skills. The school partners with community agencies including Berry Street and Foundation House to support student's wellbeing.

Outcomes:

The initial 2015 program has provided a successful transition: students are engaged both in learning and school life, overall attendance was higher than at primary school, academic performance and student behaviours are relatively positive, and families are more engaged.

The College acknowledges there is room for improvement and is continuing to refine the process, recognising that some students face complex situations and ongoing challenges. The program was expanded in 2016 to 50 students across four schools.

Key elements of success and lessons learnt:

- Engaging with parents/families. The school provides parents with strategies, ideas or reminders about how to support their children at school and in the transition. This can be a tricky conversation, so is primarily managed by the skilled welfare team.
- Starting early. By starting transition in term 3 or 4, students are already familiar with the College and have positive relationships with their mentors by the time they begin Year 7. Parents are also better equipped to help their child during the process.
- Using data to monitor and improve the program. The College monitors and assesses a range of data points (such as school attendance, academic performance and student behaviour) to identify where it is working well and areas for improvement. Data from primary schools is also used to help identify students at risk and acts as a benchmark for assessment.
- Engaging students in the design of the program. Mentees and mentors are asked what worked well and what could be improved. This feedback is used to inform and modify the program.

- Celebrating small wins and progress made by individual students and overall. For example, in feedback on results, the school focuses on a student's improvement and progress rather than on any remaining 'low' scores.
- Having a mixed team (educators and welfare staff). This provides a broader range of skills and expertise and means the school is not reliant on one or two key people to drive the program. Leadership commitment is vital to ensure it remains a priority.
- Having funding security. While seed funding was provided to run a pilot, the program is now funded sustainably using Student Resource Package and equity funding.

Principle 4: Actively collaborate with families

There are well established benefits from parental/carer engagement in student's learning.^{112,113}

Parental engagement, particularly around their child's learning, can result in higher grades, increased school attendance and completion, improved social skills and behavior at school and other improved outcomes.¹¹⁴ Yet too often schools lack the skills or resources to effectively engage with families, particularly those they find hard to reach. Stakeholders report parents and carers often lack meaningful opportunities to engage with schools, particularly in secondary school.

What works?

Engage with parents and carers

Stakeholders identify a number of potential avenues for improving family engagement. These include:

- Building the capacity of all teaching staff to engage with families, particularly those from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.¹¹⁵ This may require access to professional development and extra time for engagement. A simple starting point would be for teachers to identify families in their class who they have not engaged and make these a priority.
- Having a dedicated 'family engagement officer' based within schools or the local community to engage proactively with families and support school staff.¹¹⁶ This position could follow up with students who are showing early signs of disengagement and families who are 'hard to reach'.

¹¹²C Desforbes and A Abouchaar, *The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievements and adjustment: A literature review*, Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p. 86.

¹¹³ S Higgins, et al., op. cit.

¹¹⁴ L Emerson, J Fear, S Fox and E Sanders, *Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research*, A report by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau, Canberra, 2012, pp. 8-9.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

- Providing informal opportunities to engage with parents/carers to help build trust and rapport, such as through school BBQs and community events. Providing opportunities for parents/carers to meet and support each other is also valuable.¹¹⁷
 - Empowering families to be actively involved in their child's learning and development.¹¹⁸
- Stakeholders report workshops and information sessions work best when they are:
- delivered in partnership with community sector organisations
 - interactive and actively engaging, rather than one-way information sessions
 - held in welcoming environments where families feel comfortable, including a sporting club or local hall if they are more suitable
 - promoted with a focus on assisting students rather than to address issues within the school such as drugs and alcohol, which can be stigmatising
 - open to both students and their parents/carers but can subsequently be split off into more targeted sessions for students and parents.
- Implementing targeted strategies and initiatives, to engage 'hard to reach' parents and carers. Different strategies may be required for different communities, such as families from migrant and refugee backgrounds¹¹⁹, Aboriginal families¹²⁰ and families experiencing poverty.

A mix of approaches increases the chance of engaging with a broader range of families. Ideally, these family engagements should start in early childhood and continue throughout primary and secondary schooling. They should include both formal and informal carers, such as kinship, foster and permanent carers and grandparents, who often play an active caring role.

Good Shepherd Australia and New Zealand - empowering parent engagement in schools¹²¹

Uplift is a Victorian pilot program focused on increasing parent engagement in Wallaroo, West Hastings, an area with entrenched, intergenerational poverty. The pilot explored ways of increasing parent engagement through an empowerment methodology focused on the parent's voice and viewpoint. During three workshops parents created a vision for their children's school years, then identified actions that families, schools, and the broader community could take to enhance their child's development. Parents also monitored progress on indicators they developed.

As a result:

- A local resident's action group was formed.
- A core group of families now regularly attends activities, including playgroups and after-school activities, conducted with a Family Support Worker. Demand for these activities

¹¹⁷ D Higgins and S Morely, *Engaging Indigenous parents in their children's education*, Resource sheet no. 32, AIHW, 2014, p. 2

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p.10

¹¹⁹ Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Opening the school gate: Engaging migrant and refugee families*, CMY, Melbourne, 2015.

¹²⁰ D Higgins and S Morely, op. cit., p.10

¹²¹ S Maury, *Uplift: An empowerment approach to parent engagement in schools*, Good Shepherd Australia and New Zealand, Melbourne, 2014.

is increasing and there is higher parent attendance at a range of events, including parent morning teas and community lunches.

- Stronger links were formed between the local primary schools and community service agencies, including joint strategies to better assist 'at-risk' children.

A parent engagement worker is a core part of this program, able to link disengaged parents and their children with a broad range of education, health and community services; developing relevant activities as suggested by parents and the action group in response to family need; and working with the group to review and assess outcomes.

The model is a relatively simple and low-cost method of increasing parental engagement and is easy to replicate. The evaluation report details how this process could be expanded across other schools to encourage broader parental engagement.

Principle 5: Include every child in every classroom

In any classroom there will be diverse students, each with different interests, preferred ways of learning and circumstances beyond the classroom that affect their learning. Engaging schools work with their teachers to equip them to manage diverse classrooms, and understand each student's individual needs and strengths. They are committed to the learning and development of every student.¹²² They provide a strong program of continuous professional development, aligned with the school's strategic direction and determined in consultation with teachers, to ensure teachers are supported and well equipped to deliver evidence-based practices.^{123,124} These schools provide a broad curriculum to meet the varied interests and career choices of each student and more flexible learning environments for those students who require greater assistance.

What works?

Build rapport and aspiration to shift trajectories for children facing disadvantage

Good classroom management creates conditions that promote learning¹²⁵ and understands that positive student-teacher interactions foster student engagement.^{126,127,128} Students are most engaged in classrooms that are safe and positive, where they feel stimulated and able to take risks and ask questions. Teachers create classrooms like this by taking the time to build a deeper rapport with their students and seeking to understand their individual experiences. This will help all children and young people, but especially those facing disadvantage who frequently experience

¹²² G N Masters, op. cit.

¹²³ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, op. cit., *High values-add schools*.

¹²⁴ G N Masters, op. cit.

¹²⁵ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, op. cit., *What works best*.

¹²⁶ L Ockenden, op. cit.

¹²⁷ L M Blum, *Best Practices for effective schools*, Johns Hopkins Urban Health Institute, 2009.

¹²⁸ L Randal et al., op. cit.

the 'soft bigotry of low expectations'.^{129,130,131} By contrast, teachers in engaging schools believe each of their students can and will succeed, and provide learning strategies and support that allow them to reach their potential. Engaging schools deploy their best teachers to work with students facing disadvantage.

This is particularly important for children who have experienced trauma, including children in out-of-home-care, those who have been exposed to family violence, and refugees and asylum seekers. Trauma can impede children's development and achievement. Evidence-based programs such as Calmer Classrooms¹³² and the Berry Street Education Model, give teachers the ability to use a healing approach to learning that focuses on repairing the student's regulatory abilities and disrupted attachment.

Berry Street Education Model (BSEM)¹³³ – responding to trauma and chronic stress

The Berry Street Education Model is designed to improve a school's capacity to effectively engage and support vulnerable children and young people. It equips schools with knowledge and skills to promote positive cognitive and behavioural change, particularly for students who have experienced trauma or chronic stress.

The model applies a therapeutic, strength-based approach to teacher practice and classroom management. It integrates clinical, educational and welfare approaches, drawing on Berry Street's approaches to trauma-informed learning and neuroscience. It seeks to develop positive teacher-student relationships and build healthy emotional self-awareness and skills to self-manage.

The model started in 2014 as a pilot with two state schools, one primary and one Prep to year 12. Since then, BSEM has been rolled out to 40 schools across Victoria and interstate.

A pilot evaluation found it led to improved student engagement, wellbeing and behaviour, increased academic achievement, and improved student-teacher relationships.¹³⁴

The model works best when a whole-of-school approach is taken, so it is consistently applied across the school and incorporated into every classroom routine.¹³⁵ Ideally, every staff member is trained including teachers, leadership and administrative staff.

¹²⁹ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, op. cit., *What works best*.

¹³⁰ Curtis D et al., op. cit., p. 25.

¹³¹ G Innes, Former Disability Discrimination Commissioner, 2005-2014, *The Weekly with Charlie Pickering*, 26 August 2015.

¹³² Child Safety Commissioner, *Calmer classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children*, Melbourne, Victoria, 2007.

¹³³ Berry Street Childhood Institute, *Berry Street Education Model*, <http://www.childhoodinstitute.org.au/EducationModel>, accessed 25 May 2015.

¹³⁴ H Stokes and M Turnbull, *Evaluation of the Berry Street Education Model: trauma informed positive education enacted in mainstream schools*, University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education, Youth Research Centre, Melbourne, 2016.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Tailor learning to diverse students

Every student is different. Rather than developing 'one-size-fits-all' lessons, engaging schools tailor teaching to the diverse needs and learning styles in their classes.^{136,137,138} This includes providing individualised learning instruction, or instruction in multiple formats, to meet each student's preferred learning styles.¹³⁹ Teachers differentiate the curriculum to assist those falling behind as well as extend students performing above average.¹⁴⁰ An example is incorporating Universal Design for Learning, where lessons and outcomes are deliberately planned so all students can participate.^{141,142} Regularly monitoring student performance can assist teachers to better understand progress, learning gaps, special needs, and preferred ways of learning.^{143,144}

Teachers in engaging schools identify and build upon students' strengths to reinforce their confidence and motivation. They seek to bolster protective factors in the classroom, such as recognising and celebrating Aboriginal identity as a source of belonging and inspiration, rather than as a risk factor to be rectified.¹⁴⁵

Another practice example is explicit teaching, where students understand the purpose of the task, are given clear instructions and taught the steps needed to complete the exercise.^{146,147} Specific, timely and meaningful feedback can also increase student motivation and help them take greater ownership of their learning.^{148,149} Comprehensive lists of effective teaching approaches can be found in the references of this discussion paper.^{150,151}

Develop a broad and engaging curriculum

Enabling students to pursue subjects of genuine interest increases engagement, motivation and promotes student ownership of learning,^{152,153,154,155} as does creating meaningful and relevant subject content.^{156,157} Young people similarly argue greater subject choice and thoughtful content is an avenue to improving engagement, with the Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC)

¹³⁶ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, op. cit., *What works best*.

¹³⁷ L Ockenden, op. cit.

¹³⁸ Victorian Student Representative Council, *Education State Submission: Final Report*, VicSRC, July 2015.

¹³⁹ S Higgins, et al., op. cit.

¹⁴⁰ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, op. cit. *High values-add schools*.

¹⁴¹ National Centre on Universal Design for Learning, op. cit.

¹⁴² Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, op. cit.

¹⁴³ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, op. cit., *What works best*.

¹⁴⁴ G N Masters, op. cit.

¹⁴⁵ M Lonsdale, op. cit.

¹⁴⁶ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, op. cit. *High values-add schools*.

¹⁴⁷ G N Masters, op. cit.

¹⁴⁸ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, op. cit., *What works best*.

¹⁴⁹ G N Masters, op. cit.

¹⁵⁰ Visible Learning, *Hattie Ranking: 195 influences and effect sizes related to student achievement*, <http://visible-learning.org/hattie-ranking-influences-effect-sizes-learning-achievement/>, accessed 14 June 2016.

¹⁵¹ S Higgins, et al., op. cit.

¹⁵² S Lamb and S Rice, op. cit.

¹⁵³ S Helme and S Lamb, op. cit.

¹⁵⁴ Learning Futures, *The Engaging School: A handbook for school leaders*, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Innovation Unit, Learning Futures programme, 2012.

¹⁵⁵ L Randal et al., op. cit.

¹⁵⁶ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, op. cit. *High values-add schools*.

¹⁵⁷ L Ockenden, op. cit.

advocating a flexible curriculum for students to pursue their interests across the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), Vocational Education and Training (VET) and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) pathways.¹⁵⁸

Templestowe College¹⁵⁹ – empowering students to design their own course

Templestowe College experienced 10 years of declining enrolments, dropping from almost 1,000 students down to a low of 286. In response, it implemented dramatic structural and philosophical changes. The school reversed the notion of who is in charge and, rather than 'doing education to students', allows students to manage and design their own educational experience tailored to their goals and interests. It aims to create an environment where students enjoy learning and attending school.

Following the entry level year where basic literacy and numeracy is established, students develop their own course of study, choosing from 150 electives. They can choose one of three daily starting times (7.15, 8.50 or 10.30am) and have a large degree of control over which teachers they work with. If students want to learn something not offered by the school, they have the opportunity to develop a personalised learning project. To help determine the electives, students are surveyed each year to find out what they would like to learn. As a result, the College has introduced subjects such as computer gaming design, the science of warfare and working with animals. The Templestowe College farm now includes alpacas, sheep, goats, chickens and a small commercial garden.

To achieve these changes, the school removed many of the restrictions that traditional schools place on students, including year level structures and single-age classes. This recognises the reality that within any traditional year level, there may be a five to eight year variance between students' learning levels.

The school has a strong focus on equality and positive, respectful relationships. Its 'one person policy' means that no individual (including the principal, teachers, support staff and students) has more rights than anyone else at the school. It has a 'no yelling' policy which applies to both students and teachers. If students display negative behaviours they are still held accountable but are treated in a respectful and non-demeaning manner. Trust is also a feature: for example, the school will always inform a student before contacting their parents.

Students are involved in panels selecting new staff and are represented on the school's leadership team and curriculum committee. Students of all ages are employed by the school to tutor other students, undertake maintenance, work in reception and provide onsite catering. They receive extensive support to start and operate their own businesses.

Outcomes:

As a result of the changes, students are happy and engaged in their learning. There is strong respect for staff and students and the school has a productive learning atmosphere. Negative student behaviours and bullying have almost disappeared. There is also no

¹⁵⁸ Victorian Student Representative Council, op. cit. *Education State Submission*.

¹⁵⁹ Templestowe College, <http://www.templestowec.vic.edu.au/>, accessed at 21 July 2016.

'stigma' about students doing subjects at their level, given the mixed ages of every class. The school will also have increased enrolment back to 1,000 students in 2017.

Key elements of success and lessons learnt:

- Not reinventing the wheel. Learn from other successful models and evidence of best practice, then tailor this to the local school community.
- Consulting the school community on any changes at the earliest opportunity, including students, families and all teaching staff, and explain 'why' the changes are being considered. This enables everyone to provide input into the process, helping to gain their buy-in and reduce any potential resistance to the changes.
- Effectively communicating the changes to the school community. The school made it clear that no student would be worse off with the change. For example, students who wished to continue with a traditional education pathway from year 7 to 12 were still able to do so in the new structure.
- Using consistent language and practices. Students and teachers know what is expected of them. For example there is a '10 minute' rule where no one is allowed to speak for more than 10 minutes at a time. If this occurs in class, students can simply say 'that's 10 minutes' to the teacher which is a non-confrontational way of reminding staff about the agreed practices.
- Developing a clear vision/philosophy rather than focusing on particular initiatives. Without a clear vision, there is a risk schools will 'give up' if particular initiatives are unsuccessful and of having numerous, disjointed initiatives. Working towards the vision will help drive continuous improvement and provide the incentive to try new approaches.
- Celebrating small wins on the journey to achieving the vision.
- Getting started. There will never be a right time to implement change, you can always find an excuse. Just start the process.
- Being undaunted. Any school can make these changes. The entire program is delivered using the Student Resource Package and equity funding.

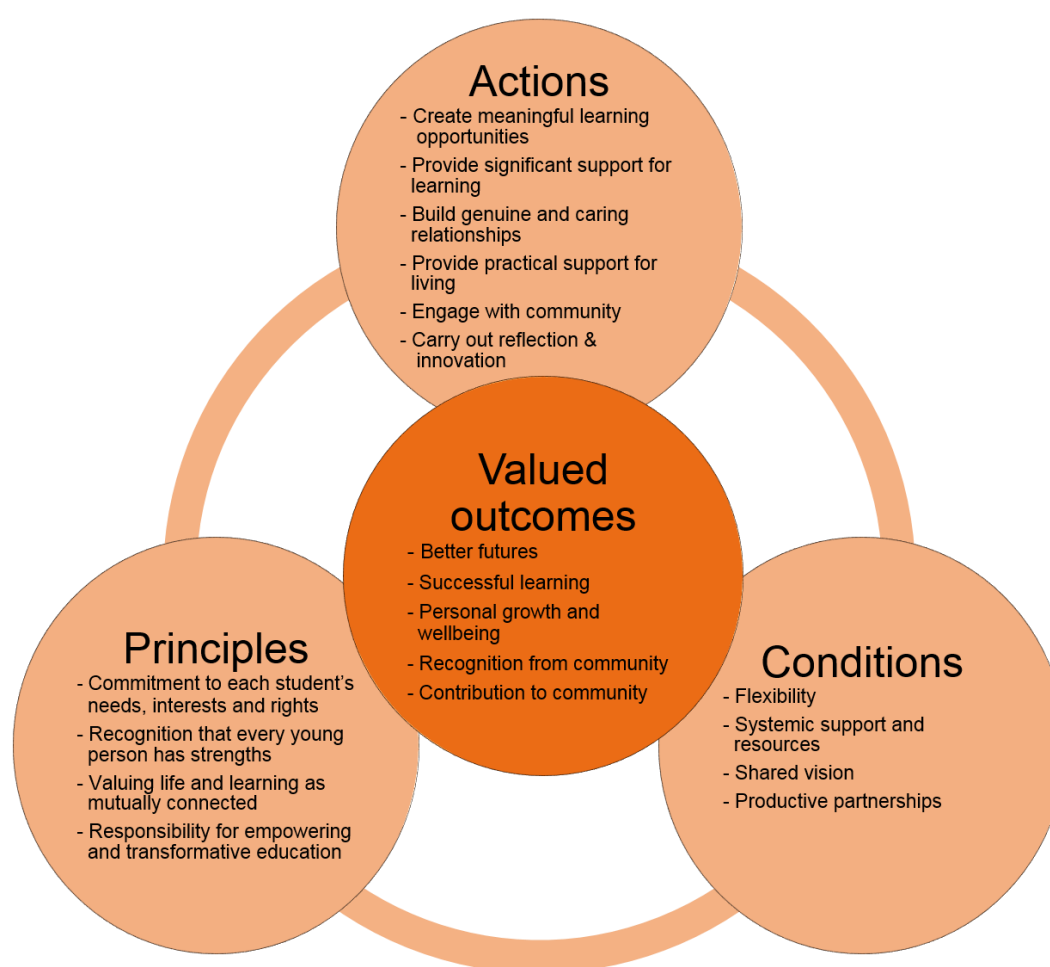
Value flexible learning options

Having a fully integrated education system that ranges from mainstream schools through to highly flexible learning options in school and community settings is best for students.¹⁶⁰ Flexible learning options assist students with complex needs who require more intensive assistance. Ideally, flexible learning options should be connected to mainstream schooling to provide a meaningful alternative, and not positioned as a solution to remove 'difficult' students.

¹⁶⁰ KPMG, *Re-engaging our kids: A framework for education provision to children and young people at risk of disengaging or disengaged from school*, Prepared for Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, KPMG, Melbourne, 2009.

Flexible learning options require higher funding levels to increase their availability, particularly in rural Victoria¹⁶¹ and to provide high quality programs. Programs are most effective when they deliver meaningful qualifications and give students comprehensive wrap-around services to improve their wellbeing. Stakeholders report the Standard Student Resource Package funding is insufficient to provide the higher levels of support required for these students. Flexible learning options should be based on best-practice evidence and a quality standards framework, such as the Framework of Quality Flexible Learning Programs.¹⁶²

Figure 3: Framework of Quality Flexible Learning Programs



Source: K te Riele, *Putting the Jigsaw Together: Flexible Learning programs in Australia: Final Report*, The Victoria Institute, 2014, p.73.

NETSchool – Bendigo Senior Secondary College¹⁶³ – providing flexible learning

NETschool Bendigo is a second campus of Bendigo Senior Secondary College (BSSC). It provides a flexible and highly individualised learning program for young people (aged 15-19)

¹⁶¹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Access to education for rural students*, 2014, p.4.

¹⁶² K te Riele, *Putting the jigsaw together: Flexible Learning programs in Australia: Final Report*, The Victoria Institute, 2014.

¹⁶³ Bendigo Senior Secondary College, *NETschool*, <http://www.bssc.edu.au/learning/netschool/>, accessed 7 June 2016.

who have left or are at risk of leaving mainstream school. Learners are enrolled at BSSC with full access to its facilities and teaching staff.

Young people are supported in a wide range of formal studies across VCAL or VCE units, or may start with an informal Research-based Learning (RBL) project. The curriculum, learning model and pace of study is tailored to their needs and they have a clear transition plan for when they are ready to move to mainstream education, training or employment.

This is accompanied by a strong focus on building wellbeing and resilience. A positive, therapeutic learning environment is provided which takes a strengths-based approach to learning and is underpinned by a robust theoretical framework.¹⁶⁴

Learners receive one-on-one support from skilled specialist teachers (such as English, Maths and Art) as well as mentors (trained teachers). Each mentor works with a small group of 10-12 learners to help them achieve personal and educational goals, link them to targeted health and wellbeing services, and negotiate their reengagement process.

Students engage in a wide range of workplace learning placements or volunteering opportunities to suit their interests which helps build their social skills and self-confidence, develop work experience and gain a sense of community.

NETSchool developed a Learner Self-appraisal of Engagement (LSAE) instrument to regularly measure self-perceptions of wellbeing, relationships, involvement in learning, basic needs, and teacher (mentor) support. This helps specialist teachers and mentors to assess student's progress and identify issues quickly, and also helps motivate learners.

Around 80-90 per cent of students successfully re-engage in mainstream education, training or employment.¹⁹⁶ An independent evaluation identified as key elements of success:

- positive relationship and trust between mentors and learners
- small group approach
- non-classroom environment
- flexible and individual approach tailored to student interests and pace of learning.¹⁶⁵

Key elements of success and lessons learnt:

- Maintaining a strong educational focus. The school is staffed by teachers (who have training in wellbeing) rather than by youth workers or psychologists.

¹⁶⁴ Learning Spaces, [The NETSchool, Aims of Innovative Learning Environment, nature and history of innovation: holistic picture of organisation](#), Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and Deakin University, 2010.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ D Cox, *Learning to learn: An evaluation of NETSchool – A reengagement program of Bendigo Senior Secondary College*, LaTrobe University, Bendigo, 2010.

- Enrolling students into a mainstream school. This allows learners to access a broader curriculum, including VCE subjects, rather than being limited to VCAL.
- Locating the alternative setting offsite but close to a mainstream school. This enables learners to make a staged transition back into the mainstream school if and when they are ready.
- Supporting and building the capacity of NETSchool staff to avoid 'burnout'. All mentors undergo Choice Theory & Reality Therapy training and receive individual supervision from a qualified psychologist to debrief and reinforce learning. Regular group workshops are held to share lessons and further develop skills. Recruiting the right staff who understand the needs of these young people is important.
- Developing strong community partnerships, for example with local businesses, the local library, hospital, guide dogs organisation, and health and community services. A partnership with La Trobe University enables fifth year occupational therapists to provide tailored support to learners, such as developing their fine motor skills.
- Having adequate funding. NETschool receives a Student Resource Package loading of 1.25 which funds individual and tailored supports.
- Regularly celebrating success.
- Using positive language (e.g. learner and mentor).
- Regularly measuring and evaluating outcomes, to understand each learner's progress and to continually improve the program.

Principle 6: Focus on the whole child or young person

Schools can enhance student engagement and educational outcomes by focusing on the whole child and young person. This involves strategies that promote good health and wellbeing and foster each student's social and emotional development in the classroom.^{166,167,168} Wellbeing measures should ideally be integrated into the school learning environment, the curricula, and policies and procedures.¹⁶⁹

Engaging schools take time to understand the diverse circumstances, needs, and strengths of every student and respond flexibly to support them.¹⁷⁰ Approaches are most effective when students are empowered to have a say in decisions that affect them. Stakeholders report schools sometimes lack the time, resources and expertise to adequately support student wellbeing. Young

¹⁶⁶ Public Health England, op. cit.

¹⁶⁷ J A Durlak, R P Weissberg, A B Dymnicki, R D Taylor, and K B Schellinger, 'The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions', *Child Development*, 2011, Vol 82 (1), pp 405–432.

¹⁶⁸ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, op. cit., *What works best*.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ S Lamb and S Rice, op. cit.

people say schools often have a limited understanding of issues they face, including mental health, poverty, living in out-of-home care and the negative effects of trauma.¹⁷¹

What works?

Promote student wellbeing

Stakeholders highlight the benefits of initiatives that assist schools to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people, such as the KidsMatters¹⁷² and MindMatters¹⁷³ frameworks. These initiatives provide schools with a structure, guidance and support to develop their own mental health strategy and help schools engage with parents and carers, health services and the wider community on mental health. Quality school-based mental health prevention programs can effectively reduce the impact of depression and anxiety of students.¹⁷⁴

Integrating student wellbeing into the school curriculum is an effective preventative measure. It can help alleviate barriers to children and young people seeking assistance, including stigma, associated with accessing services, as well as costs and time.¹⁷⁵ School-based positive psychology interventions, such as Positive Education (Pos-Ed), are significantly related to student wellbeing, relationships and academic performance.¹⁷⁶ A meta-analysis found that students who participated in universal social and emotional learning programs, such as those which build relationship skills, self-management, social awareness, and decision making skills, demonstrate “*significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance*”.¹⁷⁷

Schools also require adequate wellbeing supports to help students facing mental and physical health issues, including Student Support Service Offices (SSSOs) and the School Nursing program. Stakeholders report the current ratio of SSSOs to schools is inadequate to meet growing demand from students, particularly in growth corridors and in relation to mental health issues.

Stakeholders recommend building the capacity of teaching staff to support the wellbeing of students, particularly those facing disadvantage. This could include targeted professional development and incorporating a stronger focus in teaching qualifications on students’ social learning and socio-emotional wellbeing.

Schools are also encouraged to demonstrate strong leadership in student wellbeing, such as dedicating a high level staff member, such as an assistant principal, to address wellbeing issues.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² KidsMatters, <https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary>, Commonwealth Department of Health, beyondblue, Australian Psychological Society, Principals Australia Institute and Early Childhood Australia, accessed on 14 May 2016.

¹⁷³ MindMatters, <http://www.mindmatters.edu.au/>, Commonwealth Department of Health, accessed on 14 May 2016.

¹⁷⁴ A Werner-Seidler, Y Perry, A L Calear, J M Newby and H Christensen, ‘School-based depression and anxiety prevention programs for young people: A systematic review and meta-analysis’, in *Clinical Psychology Review*, 51, 20-47, 2016.

¹⁷⁵ Black Dog Institute, *News desk: Preventing mental illness in schools*, November 4 2016, <http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/newsmedia/newsdesk/index.cfm>, accessed 5 November 2016.

¹⁷⁶ L Waters, *A review of school-based positive psychology interventions*, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 2011.

¹⁷⁷ J A Durlak, et al., op. cit.

Stakeholders also recommend broadening the focus of school-based measurement to regularly capture and report on socio-emotional wellbeing, rather than simply educational results.

The Pavilion School¹⁷⁸ - providing holistic support to students

The Pavilion School is a state secondary school in Melbourne's north for students who have disengaged from, or been excluded by, schools or education providers. The school believes every child has the right to an excellent education, regardless of their personal circumstances or background. It is well recognised as delivering a highly successful model.

The school holds high expectations for every student and provides a rigorous academic curriculum. It uses the Universal Design for Learning framework to ensure the curriculum caters to the diverse needs of all students. Teachers identify each student's learning needs and provide differentiated instruction and targeted interventions to build their skills so they can complete Year 12. Teaching assistants provide additional support and advice.

There is a strong focus on student socio-emotional wellbeing. A calm, therapeutic learning environment is provided, underpinned by principles of unconditional positive regard and respect. Students remain with the same teacher for all classes to help build positive relationships and are assigned a youth worker to support their socio-emotional development. A multi-disciplinary wellbeing team is available to provide holistic support.

The school has a 'no suspension or exclusion' policy. To promote positive behaviours, students are explicitly taught the expectations of the school (keep the school safe and respectful, allow other students to work free from disruption, participate in school work) with a continuum of consequences if these are not met. One-on-one support is provided if a student's behaviour continues to be challenging or unproductive. During these sessions there is a continued focus on education along with a process of restorative practice.

Key elements of success and lessons learnt:

- Having a diverse range of skilled professionals to teach and support students and providing regular professional development.
- Looking after the wellbeing of staff. A clinical supervisor supports the wellbeing team and the broader teaching staff.
- Providing an inclusive, culturally safe and respectful learning environment.
- Being flexible to accommodate the student's circumstances and varying skill levels.
- Providing one-on-one support to students who display challenging or unproductive behaviours to help them work through issues, rather than withdrawing support as occurs with suspension or exclusion policies. Only 5-10 students (out of 230) require this support per term as a result of the school's preventative work.

¹⁷⁸ The Pavilion School, <http://thepavilionschool.com.au/>, accessed 25 May 2016.

- Funding the model through the Student Resource Package funding. It is therefore possible for any school to implement these practices.

Empower student voices

Engaging schools have an in-depth understanding of issues and circumstances faced by students. Taking time to understand each student helps them feel valued and accepted by the school, fosters a sense of belonging and helps schools develop tailored strategies.

Students benefit from genuine engagement in school-decision making, and from being able to take ownership of their own learning and to identify and implement solutions to issues they face.^{179,180}

^{181,182} Schools that actively seek and value student opinion have stronger student engagement.

^{183,184} Too often policies and initiatives are developed and delivered ‘to’ children and young people not ‘with’ them. That leaves many young people feeling disempowered.¹⁸⁵ Having no voice about their educational needs can be a key factor inhibiting their educational engagement.¹⁸⁶

Stakeholders highlight a range of initiatives to improve student engagement, such as ‘Teach the Teacher’, a student-led professional learning program for teachers¹⁸⁷ and ‘Learning Walks’ where students observe and provide feedback on classroom and teaching practice to inform school-wide practice. The Victorian Student Representative Council identify a range of potential strategies, including:

- establishing a student representative council in every school, which is meaningfully engaged in decisions and well resourced
- involving students on school councils
- regularly eliciting student feedback on curriculum content, processes, pedagogy and assessment
- ensuring pre-service teachers are taught about student empowerment, shared-decision-making and personalised learning.^{188,189}

Student voice and involvement in decision making must be representative of all students, including those who are most marginalised.

¹⁷⁹ S Lamb and S Rice, op. cit.

¹⁸⁰ Education Review Office, op. cit.

¹⁸¹ Learning Futures, op. cit.

¹⁸² Victorian Student Representative Council, op. cit., *Education State Submission*.

¹⁸³ Education Review Office, op. cit.

¹⁸⁴ L Randal et al., op. cit.

¹⁸⁵ L Campbell, et al. op. cit.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Victorian Student Representative Council, *Teach the Teacher: Creating positive communities through student-led conversations*, <https://www.teachtheteacher.org.au>, accessed 16 June 2016.

¹⁸⁸ A Drummond and J Rose, *VicSRC Policy Platform*, Victorian Student Representative Council, Melbourne, 2016.

¹⁸⁹ Victorian Student Representative Council, *Student Voice & the Education State: A resource for Victorian schools*, VicSRC, Melbourne, 2016.

Rethink unproductive behaviour

Too often students who display unproductive behaviours at school are viewed as a ‘problem’, without considering the broader school and family context.¹⁹⁰ There are often complex issues involved, such as experiencing trauma, mental health issues, family conflict, or inadequate assistance for their learning or additional health and development needs.¹⁹¹ Stakeholders report that many students disengage because lessons are not interesting or relevant, that the teaching is not at the right level for their learning, or that schools may not manage behaviour issues well.

Approaches that focus on punishing students fail to address underlying issues. Punishing students by excluding them from classes or school activities or, in more extreme cases, suspending or expelling them has an adverse effect, particularly for highly vulnerable groups such as children in out-of-home care. Exclusion may replicate the rejection they have often experienced and reinforce negative views of themselves¹⁹² and missing classes or days of school is likely to put them behind academically. Students who are expelled may also struggle to find alternative schools or education pathways and may miss weeks, months or years of schooling if not assisted to reengage.

Stakeholders also report instances where students, particularly those with disability, are encouraged, or only allowed, to attend school part-time. For example, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission found some students were only allowed to attend school when a funded integration aide was available, or were placed on schedules of part-time attendance following behaviour problems resulting from their disability not being well managed.¹⁹³

YACVic’s recent paper ‘*Out of sight, out of mind?*’ explores the issues of student exclusion from Victorian schools in detail and identifies alternative approaches to suspension, expulsion and exclusion.¹⁹⁴ The paper also highlights the more prevalent issue of informal exclusion, where students are encouraged or urged to leave a school.

Principle 7: Work with local communities

Stakeholders and research literature consistently highlight the extensive benefits derived from schools working collaboratively with health, community and youth services, other education providers, business and the broader school community.^{195,196,197,198} Through purposeful collaboration, schools gain access to “*information, opportunities and expertise that would otherwise be unavailable within the confines of an individual school*”.¹⁹⁹ Effective collaboration can

¹⁹⁰ A M Sullivan et al., op. cit.

¹⁹¹ Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, op cit.

¹⁹² Child Safety Commissioner, [Calmer classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children](#), Melbourne, Victoria, 2007.

¹⁹³ Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, *Held Back: The experiences of students with disabilities in Victorian schools*, VEOHRC, Melbourne, 2012, p.93.

¹⁹⁴ Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, op. cit.

¹⁹⁵ T Bentley and C Cazaly, op. cit.

¹⁹⁶ S Lamb and S Rice, op. cit.

¹⁹⁷ T Dreise, G Milgate, B Perrett and T Meston, op cit.

¹⁹⁸ L Ockenden, op. cit.

¹⁹⁹ T Bentley and C Cazaly, op. cit.

improve a student's wellbeing, skills, engagement with learning, attitudes towards school and sense of belonging.^{200,201} Forming strong partnerships can help schools effectively implement changes and initiatives. This requires a willingness from schools to 'open the school gates' and a genuine commitment both from schools and partner organisations to work together.

What works?

Partner with local education providers, community organisations and businesses

Partnerships between schools, other education providers and community sector organisations can improve student engagement, retention and wellbeing by sharing resources and expertise.^{202,203} Partnerships can provide more holistic supports for students, facilitate successful transitions between early childhood, primary school and secondary school, and increase parental engagement.

Hastings partnership – linking schools and early years²⁰⁴

Hastings was identified for one of three Linking Schools and Early Years (LSEY) pilot sites, due to high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and high proportions of children with developmental vulnerabilities. Led by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI), with funding from the R E Ross Trust and DET, schools, kindergartens, childcare services, child and family community services, community health and local and state government have formed a local partnership to improve educational and wellbeing outcomes for children in Hastings.

The Hastings partnership group takes a collaborative 'place-based approach' to strengthen practice and create a more integrated service system to assist children and their families. The group believes "*it is the joint responsibility of the entire community to care for every child in Hastings*" and the whole community benefits from doing this. Community level data, including Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) results, is used to plan and implement actions across three key areas:

- *Support successful transitions from early childhood to school, particularly for children with additional needs.* For example, through the 'Bridge into Prep' program to enhance transition and 'Teacher Talk' to build the social, language and early literacy skills of preschool children.
- *Build stronger relationships between families, early years services and schools,* including through parent information sessions developed by parents in partnership with Good Shepherd.

²⁰⁰ Australian Council for Educational Research, Schools First: Final Report, ACER 2008.

²⁰¹ S Sanjeevan, M McDonald and T Moore, *Primary schools as community hubs: A review of the literature*, The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Melbourne, July 2012, p.10.

²⁰² S Lamb and S Rice, op. cit.

²⁰³ T Bentley and C Cazaly, op. cit.

²⁰⁴ The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, *Linking Schools & Early Years: Hastings*, <http://www.rch.org.au/lsey/communities/Hastings/>, accessed 1 June 2016.

- *Support schools to be responsive to the individual learning needs of all children.* One example is the 'Reading for Life – Literacy Program' to support children's reading development and provide them with a positive adult role model.

These initiatives are underpinned by services working more closely together. For example, all kindergarten, childcare and early primary school teachers undertake joint professional learning, while early years educators spend time in each other's classrooms and develop and deliver joint lessons.

The project has resulted in a genuine partnership and 'whole of community' approach to support children and families.²⁰⁵ Higher numbers of children participate in transition to school programs and there is greater parental participation in classroom activities and community events.²⁰⁶ Children entering primary school are more prepared to engage in learning and schools are better meeting the needs of all students and families.²⁰⁷ Local school enrolments are up and children's reading and literacy skills have improved.

The partnership group has taken ownership of the project and after the pilot's completion made a concerted effort to keep the project running. A Parent and Family Community Development Worker is employed to engage with vulnerable families. Funding has been secured from a range of sources, including several local businesses, philanthropic funds, a local parish and support from community services. Volunteers within the community have continued their involvement in initiatives such as the Reading for Life – Literacy program.

Key elements of success and lessons learnt:

- Building trust, strong relationships and developing a shared 'outward looking vision'. Schools and services in Hastings are not competitive but genuinely work together to put the 'needs of the child first'.
- Securing a mix of funding sources provides greater sustainability.
- Using funding to relieve educators from their roles at kinder, childcare or primary school to attend meetings, events and training.
- Building informal, positive relationships with families, particularly through the Parent and Family Community Development Worker. Many families have a fear of professionals and are reluctant to seek assistance. Providing a friendly face has boosted parents' engagement and linked them into other services.
- Being open to try new initiatives and flexible in the delivery of strategies and programs, to suit children and families, services and volunteers.
- Having a facilitator from MCRI in the pilot phase, to help embed professional development and provide practical strategies and advice for the classroom.

²⁰⁵ B J Newton and K Valentine, *Linking Schools and Early Years Project Evaluation: final report*, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2013.

²⁰⁶ The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, op cit., *Linking Schools and Early Years*.

²⁰⁷ Australian Early Development Index (AEDI), *School Story: Linking Schools and Early Years Hastings*, Melbourne, 2012.

There are also opportunities and benefits for partnerships between schools and local businesses and industry. This can help raise student aspirations, provide meaningful work experience, enhance the delivery of VCAL and VET, improve student attainment, and increase students' knowledge of career opportunities and the nature of work.^{208,209} Businesses benefit from skilling their future workforce and enhancing their reputation in the community.

Partnering opportunities are numerous and can include industry tours and workplace visits, holding mock job interview panels, providing trade taster programs, and mentoring students. Schools have also leveraged financial and in-kind support from local businesses and philanthropic organisations to assist students facing disadvantage, such as funding targeted interventions for their learning.

Ardoch Youth Foundation's Literacy Buddies® Program²¹⁰ – reaching out to read and write

Ardoch's Literacy Buddies® program supports children from disadvantaged backgrounds to build their literacy skills and aspirations by providing meaningful interactions with positive adult role models. It is an in-school program in which primary school students – “Little Buddies” – are matched with corporate volunteers – “Big Buddies”, with whom they exchange letters through the year. The Big Buddies visit the school to meet their Little Buddies and talk about how literacy is used in their workplace. Students also visit their mentor's workplace which broadens their education and employment aspirations. The program develops children's social skills, confidence and engagement in learning and fosters positive connections between schools and local businesses.

Ardoch Youth employs two coordinators, whose roles include reviewing all the letters to manage any risks for students and schools.

The program can be incorporated into the class curriculum and adapted. The corporate partners help cover the costs.

A program evaluation identified a social value return of \$8.32 for every dollar invested.²¹¹ Its low cost and high value provides the potential for it to be expanded across Victoria.

Integrate services

Integrated service models, such as establishing schools as community hubs, provide children, young people and their families with better access to a range of services and activities. They combine universal education and health services such as school, kindergarten and Maternal and Child Health services, with other specialised community and health services. Integrated service models can deliver positive educational and wellbeing outcomes, including improved attendance, educational attainment, wellbeing, social development and behaviours, increased engagement in

²⁰⁸ Inner Metro Youth & Community Partnership, *Who pays for youth disengagement and unemployment? A case for smarter thinking and for investment*, prepared by the Education to Employment (e2e) Working Group, July 2015.

²⁰⁹ Australian Council for Educational Research, *The benefits of school-business relationships: Final report*, 2011.

²¹⁰ Ardoch Youth Foundation, *Literacy Buddies*, <https://www.ardoch.org.au/literacy-buddies>, accessed 1 June 2016.

²¹¹ Net Balance Foundation, *An SROI study of the Literacy Buddies® Program*, Ardoch Youth Foundation, 2013.

learning, earlier identification of issues, and greater family engagement in school.²¹² They are particularly useful in supporting disadvantaged children, young people and their families.

Integrated service models may involve elements of both co-location and virtual integration, depending on community needs.²¹³ A literature review identifies the following best practices elements for establishing a school-community hub:

- Stakeholder consultation to identify the needs and opportunities of the local community
- Committed leadership team
- Genuine collaboration with partner agencies
- Flexibility to adapt to the changing needs of the school community
- Regular monitoring of progress and processes
- Sustained commitment, accepting that change will take time
- Adequate resources (time and funding). For example providing staff with professional development, time for partners to invest in activities and relationship building, and funding to employ coordinators and build new infrastructure, where required.²¹⁴

Kurnai College – Education Hub²¹⁵ – strengthening school-community partnerships

The Kurnai Education Hub is the result of a partnership between Kurnai College and the Smith Family. It was established in 2012 to increase the retention of students and support their successful pathways into further education and training, with four key goals: student wellbeing and engagement; foundation skills and student outcomes learning; careers and pathways; and parental engagement with learning.

The Hub is not a physical building, but a process for strengthening school-community partnerships. It connects students and their families to a wide range health and community services. Two full time workers (from the Smith Family) are based at the school to build and maintain relationships with partner organisations and work with the leadership team.

Membership of the Hub's executive committee involves Kurnai College, Baw Baw Latrobe Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN), Latrobe City Council, DET, Monash University, Federation University and the Smith Family.

The Hub has driven changes to school processes and operations and developed targeted initiatives to suit the school community. For example:

- delivering mentoring and tutoring programs
- reviewing and modifying the Kurnai Welfare team operations

²¹² S Sanjeevan, M McDonald and T Moore, *Primary schools as community hubs: A review of the literature*, The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Melbourne, 2012.

²¹³ T Moore and A Skinner, *An integrated approach to early childhood development: Background Paper*, Murdoch Children's Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health, Melbourne, 2010.

²¹⁴ S Sanjeevan et al., op. cit.

²¹⁵ Education Dynamics, *Evaluation of the Kurnai Education Hub Project*, The Smith Family, 2015.

- delivering career and work experience programs
- setting up a Kurnai pantry to provide free breakfast and lunch to students, which is operated by VCAL students and parent volunteers
- reviewing and amending parental engagement communication strategies
- developing a Kurnai Young Parents Program (KYPP) in response to the number of young women leaving school to have, or care for, children.

It has led a noticeable improvement in student retention and aspirations, and some improvement in student achievement.²¹⁶ Parental involvement with the school has increased, and education is more highly valued by families.

Key elements of success and lessons learnt:

- Thoroughly scoping the project to inform design. Research of best practice models and extensive local consultation was undertaken over six months to understand the issues faced by students and determine what would be most effective.
- Gaining community ownership of the Hub. Following consultation, the school, local community and key stakeholders endorsed the Hub's Strategic Plan. The Hub continues to work with the whole community. For example many local businesses provide financial and in-kind support as they see the Hub as providing mutual benefits, to students, the community and local business.
- Having a flexible design, to adapt to the needs of the students and families rather than being locked into delivering pre-determined activities.
- Having dedicated and skilled workers in the Hub to pull everything together. They are funded through a combination of philanthropy and school-based equity funding.
- Providing strong leadership. The Kurnai College leadership team fully embraced the Hub concept, which helped it gain traction throughout the school.
- Making the most of opportunities. The school was already building stronger relationships with the broader community, with a particular focus on engaging Koorie families and families experiencing disadvantage. The Hub aligned with the vision and goals of the school.
- Leveraging the expertise and connections of community agencies. The Smith Family acts as the intermediary between the school and community partners, which has provided opportunities and partnerships that were previously not possible.

Draw on existing programs

Existing programs, including Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) and School Focused Youth Services (SFYS), already facilitate effective school-community partnerships.

²¹⁶ Education Dynamics, *Evaluation of the Kurnai Education Hub Project*, The Smith Family, 2015.

Stakeholders recommend efforts to increase school-community partnerships should use and enhance existing initiatives, rather than establish new programs.

LLENs have a solid track record in fostering partnerships between schools and other education providers, health and community services, industry and local government to improve outcomes for young people. Their ability to work strategically across a region to identify and respond to local services gaps and develop collaborative locally-based responses is also highly regarded.

SFYS provide schools with practical assistance to help young people at risk of disengaging and promote partnerships between schools and community services. Stakeholders highlight the benefits of this role, but report the new Program Guidelines and funding approval processes are too restrictive.

Two new Victorian government initiatives also offer great opportunity. The Lookout Education Support Centres aims to improve the education and wellbeing support of children and young people in out-of-home care. The Navigator Pilot Program assists 12-17 year olds who have disengaged from school to reengage with education or training. It is operating across eight of the 17 DET regional areas.

Questions of Engagement – investigating disengagement and the best responses²¹⁷

In late 2013 a partnership was established between the Maribyrnong and Moonee Valley Local Learning and Employment Network (MMVLLEN), Victoria University and several primary and secondary schools in Melbourne's Inner West to improve student engagement in the middle years, between Years 5-8.

The partnership's 'Questions of Engagement' project sought to gain insight into student engagement and motivation in particular classrooms within each of the schools and develop appropriate strategies in response.

Data on factors promoting or hindering student engagement were collected through administration of a Motivation and Engagement Questionnaire and focus groups with students at the beginning of the study and following the implementation of the strategy. Direct feedback to teachers about their students' engagement with learning and how they experienced teaching in the classroom was a powerful element of the research. Improvement strategies varied significantly between the schools and included programs to amplify the student voice, to structure lessons around meeting set goals, and continuous improvement at the whole-of-school and classroom levels.

The action research project affirmed the value of empowering teachers with student-based data. Schools, school leaders and teachers gained valuable insight into their teaching practices and the changes they can implement to improve student engagement, learning

²¹⁷ P BurrIDGE, C Carpenter and W Pitt, *Questions of Engagement: Improving the learning experience of students in years 5-8: Interim report for the Maribyrnong & Moonee Valley Local Learning and Employment Network*, Victoria University and MMVLLEN, December 2014.

and development.²¹⁸ Teachers valued the direct student feedback to inform their practice, and principals are using the data to inform their strategic planning around student engagement. The power of this research lies in the development of a methodology that engages classroom teachers and school leadership teams in understanding and taking action to improve the learning experience of their students.

MMVLLLEN and Victoria University hope to expand this project to more schools in the region to provide more definitive evidence of its impact on student engagement.

²¹⁸ P Burridge, W Pitt, V Snook & M Kerin, *Questions of Engagement: Improving the learning experiences of students in Years 5 to 8*, MMVLLLEN, Flemington, Victoria 2016.

Supporting good practice

Spend money where it is needed

The costs of education can be a barrier to engaging in school for children and young people facing disadvantage. This includes the direct costs of schooling, such as school uniforms, elective subjects, sport activities, camps and excursions, and electronic devices such as iPads. It also includes indirect costs, such as the expense of travelling to school and providing internet access at home. Without adequate support these children and young people may miss out on educational opportunities and experience social exclusion.

Some school communities also experience ‘concentrated disadvantage’, where they have a large proportion of disadvantaged students²¹⁹. This can negatively affect educational outcomes²²⁰ and also reduce the ability of the school to raise additional funds to assist these students, with less capacity to fundraise within their school communities and fewer families able to make financial contributions through ‘parent payments’. These schools also experience difficulty attracting teachers, particularly high quality and experienced teachers.²²¹

Provide adequate equity funding

Stakeholders reinforce school funding arrangements should be centred on a needs-based funding model that recognises both the individual circumstances of the student and their family, as well as levels of disadvantage within the school. Having adequate equity funding enables schools to provide additional assistance to students facing disadvantage and address the adverse effects concentrated disadvantage.

It is crucial that commitments under the Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling²²² are met beyond 2017. The Victorian Government should advocate for the Commonwealth Government to meet its commitment under the Gonski deal in 2018-19 and 2019-20 and should continue to target Victorian equity funding towards assisting the most disadvantaged students and schools.

Many of the schools profiled in this discussion paper use equity funding to substantially enhance the learning, development and wellbeing of students. The Australian Education Union (AEU)

²¹⁹ While this primarily relates to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, it can also refer to other groups of students more likely to experience disadvantage such as Aboriginal students and students with disability.

²²⁰ D Gonski, K Boston, K Greiner, C Lawrence, B Scales and P Tannock, *Review of funding for schooling: Final report*, Canberra, December 2011.

²²¹ L Connors and J McMorow, ‘Imperatives in School Funding: equity, sustainability and achievement,’ *Australian Education Review*, ACER, Victoria, 2015, p. 50.

²²² D Gonski, et al., op. cit.

recently launched a report²²³ demonstrating how Gonski funding has been used to improve student performance across 25 Australian schools.

Invest to help more students with additional health and development needs

Stakeholders report fundamental changes are required to the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) funding model to assist all children with additional health and development needs and to better target the funding available to children most at risk.

The PSD uses a rigid, diagnosis-based eligibility criteria model, and directly supports about 4 per cent of Victorian students.²²⁴ However, about 7 per cent of Australian children aged up to 14 have some level of disability,²²⁵ and about 20 per cent have additional health and development needs, requiring extra assistance to fulfil their educational potential²²⁶. This means many students are unable to gain assistance through the targeted PSD funding component.

Both the Government Schools Funding Review²²⁷ and the Review of the PSD²²⁸ recommend redesigning the PSD funding model to take a strength-based functional needs approach. Moving to functional and educational needs-based assessment could help empower all students with additional health and development needs to succeed at school.

Help families manage financial costs

The principles of a free and compulsory education were first established in Victoria in the Education Act 1872. In reality families are being asked to spend increasing amounts on their children's education²²⁹. Community sector organisations and schools assist students facing disadvantage through a range of mechanisms, such as providing vulnerable students with breakfast, lunch, uniforms and books, and transporting students to school. Several school communities have also implemented more innovative solutions, including access to a free work wardrobe, which they can borrow when seeking employment and access to free childcare for students who are young parents. Yet rising costs make it difficult for schools and community agencies to meet demand for assistance.

Greater resources are required from the Victorian Government to help disadvantaged children, young people and their families meet the costs of schooling. DET also has a key role in guiding schools about how to best assist families facing disadvantage and to share innovative solutions across the state. DET should regularly monitor the new Parent Payment Policy to ensure schools understand and comply with the policy.

²²³ Australian Education Union, [Getting results: Gonski funding in Australian Schools](#), AEU, 2016.

²²⁴ PSD Review Team, *Program for Students with Disabilities Review: In-person Targeted Stakeholder discussions*, 2015, p. 3.

²²⁵ AIHW, *A picture of Australia's children 2012*, AIHW 2012, 2012, p. 26.

²²⁶ S Goldfeld, M O'Connor, M Sayers, T Moore, F Oberklaid, op. cit.

²²⁷ S Bracks, [Greater Returns on Investment in Education: Government Schools Funding Review](#), Department of Education and Training, December 2015, p. 22.

²²⁸ Department of Education and Training, [The Education State: Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities](#), April 2016, P. 28

²²⁹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Additional School Costs for Families*, Melbourne, 2015.

Work together across government

Education providers (including ECEC, primary and secondary schools and alternative education providers), the community sector, DET and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) each hold valuable data about the wellbeing and educational needs of children and young people. Yet stakeholders report that too often these sectors work in silos. Better data sharing can help monitor individual children and young people's progress, prompting timely interventions and helping services better cater for students' needs. There are also gaps in the data sets available. Access to comprehensive data sets can enhance school and local community planning and inform policy and evidence based practice for all children and young people.

Undertake data collection, monitoring and evaluation

DET and DHHS have a key role in monitoring and evaluating policies, programs and interventions to identify best practice and drive continuous improvement in outcomes. This requires coordinating, analysing and disseminating holistic data sets from a range of sources about how children and young people are performing. Particular attention is needed to identify the issues faced by vulnerable children and young people and tracking their wellbeing and educational performance.

Stakeholders identify gaps in the data, including the educational outcomes of children with chronic illness, children with additional health and development needs, children from CALD backgrounds, especially refugees and asylum seekers, SSAIGD young people and children in out-of-home-care or involved in child protection. Other improvements include capturing accurate and accessible data on school exclusion and absenteeism, and identifying the different education settings where children and young people learn. This includes differentiating between flexible learning options in mainstream schools and community settings, or identifying young people enrolled in vocational education and training.

Enhance information sharing and collaboration

Enhancing data sharing between ECEC providers and primary and secondary schools facilitates successful transitions for children and young people from kinder to primary school and later to secondary school, or when children move between education providers. Greater information sharing between education providers and the community sector helps provide holistic services to vulnerable learners and promotes early identification and intervention, before issues escalate. It also helps vulnerable students and their families to only tell their story once, rather than repeating it to numerous services.

Stakeholders report schools and services providers often do not share valuable information due to uncertainty about privacy rules. DET could develop clear policies and guidelines to encourage data sharing in the best interests of children and young people. This would be enhanced by greater data sharing and collaboration between government departments, particularly DET and DHHS, and between all levels of government in areas of shared responsibility.

Create and sustain structures that support change

DET has a crucial role to play in guiding, monitoring and supporting Victorian schools to be 'engaging schools' which empower every child and young person to fully participate in education and achieve their potential. This involves providing clear guidance on state-wide initiatives and policies, and supporting schools at the local level to form partnerships and implement effective practice. To achieve systemic change, genuine investment and sustained effort are required from DET.

Provide schools with clear guidance and support

Substantial research exists on the best ways to assist students, with a range of useful guides and tools available.^{230,231,232,233} DET should support schools to understand and effectively implement evidence-based practice. This includes providing schools with targeted and meaningful professional development. Stakeholders warn against simply placing resources and training online in an attempt to reach all schools.

DET can also facilitate schools to share best practice, innovative ideas and lessons learnt. DET regional staff could also help facilitate local partnerships between education providers and the community and business sector, including place-based approaches to supporting students facing disadvantage.

DET has developed several good policies and guidelines but stakeholders report too many schools are not aware of them or lack the resources or expertise to implement them fully. For instance, stakeholders report inconsistent implementation of Student Support Groups and Individual Learning Plans for students with disability, commitments under the Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment, and policies designed to minimise school exclusion. Ensuring every school implements these policies and providing schools with greater support in their implementation would help alleviate this issue.

Increase school accountability for student engagement

While many schools work hard to engage students experiencing disadvantage, there are limited accountability mechanisms for schools to support students who are at risk and to prevent early school leaving. The increasing pressure on schools to achieve good academic results may discourage them from retaining students who are not performing academically or seen as 'difficult'. Anecdotal evidence suggests some schools may reduce their efforts to engage students after Census date, once their funding for the year is confirmed. Stakeholders recommend DET implements stronger accountability mechanisms for schools around student engagement, early school leaving and the use of equity funding to assist students facing disadvantage.

²³⁰ G N Masters, op. cit.

²³¹ S Higgins, et al., op. cit.

²³² Visible Learning, op cit.

²³³ Student Wellbeing Hub, <https://www.studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/>, accessed 24 October 2016.

Provide a long-term commitment

Stakeholders express frustration at the continual changes to programs and initiatives and lack of funding uncertainly faced by programs. There are also too many pilot programs rolled out by DET without thorough evaluations or a commitment to expand effective initiatives. The constant change and uncertainty undermines efforts to build relationships and causes families, schools and broader communities to lose confidence in programs. For instance, the Navigator Pilot Program has only been funded for two years and will operate in eight of the 17 regional areas,²³⁴ leaving services gaps for vulnerable young people in the remaining nine regions and uncertainty beyond two years. Stakeholders also highlight the frequent changes to the SFYS program.

Adequate resources and a long-term commitment are required achieve the best outcome from programs and initiatives. It takes time to build trust and effective collaboration between schools, families, community sector organisations, education providers and the local community. DET should also provide sufficient flexibility for initiatives to be tailored to meet the needs of the students within a particular school or local area.

²³⁴ Department of Education and Training, Navigator Pilot Program, <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/educationstate/Pages/navigator.aspx>, accessed 20 June 2016.

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