



# Youth engagement PRACTICE INSIGHTS



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# Overview

Our schools set out to support every student to succeed. However, each year, too many young people disengage from education, training and employment pathways. What we do in our schools can have a great impact on the future wellbeing of young people. While each school and cohort is unique, research and evaluation of effective practice has identified key practices that underpin the academic achievement and meaningful engagement of every student. These practices apply across diverse settings, in different contexts and can respond to varying student needs.

In Queensland, the School Improvement Model has been informed by the National School Improvement Tool (NSIT). In particular the School Improvement Hierarchy provides a structure to inform practice and identify next steps for school improvement. The practices that are described in this framework are complementary with the NSIT.

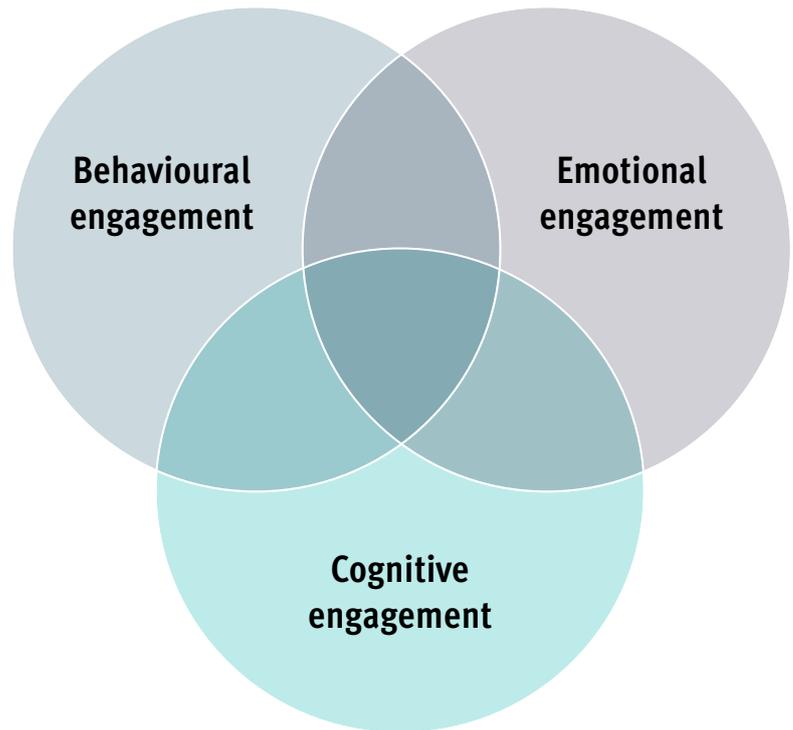
These practice insights provide an evidence-based guide for schools seeking to promote best practice in student engagement alongside academic achievement. It uses established research to define capabilities and practices that put engagement at the heart of professional practice. Schools can use this framework to evaluate their efforts in identifying students at risk of disengagement, connect with students who have disengaged, and take steps to better support students to re-engage with education, training and employment pathways.

# What is student engagement?

**True student engagement is complex: it's about more than good classroom behaviour or attendance.**

Research establishes that there are three dimensions to engagement<sup>1</sup>:

- ▶ cognitive: the extent to which a student is personally invested in, and takes ownership of, their learning
- ▶ behavioural: the level of a student's participation in all areas of their school including academic, social and extracurricular activities
- ▶ emotional: the nature of a student's relationship with learning, their teachers, and others in the learning environment, feeling included in their school, and having feelings of belonging to the school



Engagement across the three dimensions can look very different for every student.

Engagement varies in intensity and duration. It can be short term and situation specific or long term and stable. A student's level of engagement is not a 'fixed state' and will respond to external factors such as their relationships, their classroom environment and their own investment in their learning.

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<sup>1</sup> Fredericks et al, 2004

# What does student disengagement look like?

**Student disengagement has far-reaching, lifelong consequences. It can contribute to a person earning lower wages, and an increased likelihood of unemployment, incarceration and poverty.**

Disengagement refers to a situation where a child or young person demonstrates none of the characteristics of engagement, and/or they are not enrolled at school or have very poor school attendance.

It takes skill to identify and respond to a student who is disengaging. The presence of some characteristics of disengagement may indicate a child or young person is at risk of disengaging. Importantly, disengagement may not always be evidenced by behavioural issues, but may manifest as quiet and passive.



**There are enormous costs associated with not being fully engaged in work, education and training at age 24. Young people who fall into this group are less likely to develop skills and less likely to find meaningful and well-paid employment. Missing out on educational opportunity sets a pattern of struggle throughout adult life.**

*Lamb & Huo, 2017*



# Youth engagement Practice Insights

**Every student engaged and succeeding is what drives principals and teachers in schools across Queensland every single day. This is complex work requiring skill and insight.**

Research undertaken in Queensland state high schools has highlighted key practices and capabilities that underpin meaningful engagement and academic achievement for every student. This framework consolidates that research, documenting the capabilities and practices that support students' success in these high-performing schools.

Of course, in the realm of school improvement, the practices and themes in this framework are not new. They align with the National School Improvement Tool, other recognised frameworks such as the Australian Wellbeing Framework, and existing research on effective practices to lift school performance.

The intent of this framework is not to document everything that effective leaders and teachers do, but rather to focus on the practices that appear to lead to improvements in student engagement and academic success.

This framework does not replace other resources that schools may use to guide improvement in their practice. Further, the capabilities and practices outlined in this framework may appear similar to those contained in other frameworks. The difference here is that this framework identifies the practices that put engagement at the heart of professional practice. It is this focus on engagement that will help develop a higher level of precision and better support the engagement and academic success of all students.

# Culture and vision for engaging and retaining every student

The engagement of every student, particularly those who are experiencing challenges, requires highly professional practices that inform a vision and create a culture that prioritises the success of every student.

To achieve this, school leaders must create a culture that sets high expectations and prioritises student engagement and achievement, while empowering staff to take the necessary steps to support every student.

A school's vision articulates to the whole school community its values and goals for the future.

Research shows that a vibrant and positive school culture with a shared enthusiasm for learning is key to successful student outcomes. This is even more critical when building a culture of engagement and achievement for every student. Therefore, intentional design along with creative and thoughtful planning are essential.



**To change a school culture and create a more inclusive school, educators must question their beliefs about teaching and learning for students who struggle to learn and engage in a collaborative change process that results in new values, beliefs, norms, and preferred behaviours.**

*Fullan, 2007; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000, 2002, 2006.  
From Waldron & McLeskey (2010)*



## OBSERVABLE PRACTICES

- ▶ Leaders develop and communicate a shared vision and sharp focus on the engagement, retention and achievement of every student.
- ▶ Individual staff have the courage to lead this vision and challenge common practices, even those that are longstanding, if they interfere with the achievement and retention of all students.
- ▶ Clear expectations are established for the whole school for the engagement and achievement of every student regardless of the challenges.
- ▶ The school culture rejects deficit explanations for student's outcomes and negative assumptions held about students are challenged.
- ▶ The school culture fosters a willingness to take risks and develop and trial responses to achieve student outcomes.
- ▶ There is an observable whole-of-school commitment to do the right thing by every student, particularly vulnerable students.



## CONSIDER

### Leader

- ▶ Does your vision state the goals you have set to engage and retain all students, including students at risk of school failure, disengagement or early exit from schooling?
- ▶ How does your school vision and plan focus on engagement and achievement for every student through inclusive and engaging practice?
- ▶ How do you share your school's vision with your school and community?

### School team

- ▶ How is your school's vision reflected in your daily practice?
- ▶ How does your school's vision impact on student outcomes?
- ▶ Do you have the courage to be an advocate for your school's vision? How do you build this courage?

# High-performing and expert teams for student outcomes

Becoming an expert teacher is an ongoing process. It requires regular analysis of instruction and its effectiveness, particularly for engaging students whose approach to learning may require additional adjustments to maximise their potential.

In high-performing teams, teachers and other staff study their own practices and that of their colleagues to improve their understanding of the complex interactions between school staff, students, curriculum content, and different pedagogical approaches.

Collective and concerted efforts across teams are required to achieve outcomes for every student, particularly those who experience the greatest challenges. High-performing and expert teams work together to achieve an equitable education for every student. Such teams work collegially and collaboratively to understand individual students' needs and distribute resources, such as teaching expertise, to redress disadvantage and achieve positive outcomes for every student.



**Accomplishing the maximum impact on student learning depends on teams of teachers working together, with excellent leaders or coaches, agreeing on worthwhile outcomes, setting high expectations, knowing the students' starting and desired success in learning, seeking evidence continually about their impact on all students, modifying their teaching in light of this evaluation, and joining in the success of truly making a difference to student outcomes.**

*John A.C. Hattie, Visible Learning for Teachers:  
Maximizing Impact on Learning*



## OBSERVABLE PRACTICES

- ▶ The school's teams work in an integrated way to identify students at risk of disengaging and provide timely, appropriate and efficient interventions and responses to achieve engagement and academic outcomes for every student.
- ▶ Every team member is committed to ongoing professional learning to equip themselves with the skills they need to promote engagement and achievement for every student.
- ▶ The school's teams work together and share expertise to support students at risk of disengaging.
- ▶ The school builds the technical skills it needs to mobilise and sustain engagement and achievement for every student.
- ▶ The school values emotional intelligence and empathy when working with vulnerable young people.



## CONSIDER

### Leader

- ▶ How does your school harness its staff's expert knowledge to support students who are at risk of disengagement?
- ▶ How do you support your staff to ask questions, seek support from others and engage in collaborative professional development?
- ▶ How does your school provide ongoing professional development opportunities to staff to support student engagement and outcomes for all students?

### School team

- ▶ How do you work with other team members, including specialist staff, to identify and respond to student needs?
- ▶ Do you ask questions, seek support from others and engage in collaborative professional development?
- ▶ Do you reflect on, and strive to build, your emotional intelligence?

## Tracking every student

Research undertaken in Queensland state high schools has found that a clear and common understanding of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement indicators, as well as capabilities to collect, manipulate and analyse data are essential in supporting student outcomes. In particular, effective analysis of data can identify early warning signs of disengagement, inform targeted intervention, and provide insights on the effectiveness of strategies to promote engagement at an individual, cohort and school level.

Effective schools have a routine for regular data collection and review and monitoring of progress.

At an individual level, data collection and analysis is key to supporting the identification of early warning signs of student disengagement. Data can also help schools understand the effectiveness of different learning environments for individual students, where a student may need further support, and what that support might look like. Data analysis supports teachers and school teams in exercising their professional judgement and assessment of student needs.

At a cohort or school level, effective data analysis provides insights into a school's progress and challenges in promoting engagement of its students. Schools should review data for evidence of improvement and regression over time, to assess performance in comparison with 'like' schools, and to measure growth and attainment across years of school.



**...the collection of educational data serves three vital purposes in schools: identifying starting points, monitoring improvement, and evaluating effectiveness.**

*Geoff Masters, CEO ACER, 2016*



## OBSERVABLE PRACTICES

- ▶ Monitoring practices are embedded across the school to review the impact of strategies to achieve the engagement and positive academic success of every student, particularly those most at risk.
- ▶ The school's team is equipped with expert knowledge to collect and analyse data and identify precise insights to inform action.
- ▶ The school sets explicit targets for student engagement and achievement and a systematic approach is in place for the monitoring and evaluation of progress and success.
- ▶ Teachers use evidence of student progress across cognitive, behavioural and emotional dimensions to work with each student to set their personal goals for improvement relative to their needs and levels of engagement.
- ▶ The school stores student data securely and individual student privacy and dignity is maintained. The school only shares identifiable student data when allowed and in the interests of the student.
- ▶ The school uses additional data collection tools, such as school wellbeing surveys, to address gaps in data.
- ▶ The school uses a range of data at disaggregate levels to identify students who may be at risk of disengaging and monitors data at aggregate levels to track the school's performance in engagement and achievement. Data items monitored include:
  - A to E behaviour
  - school disciplinary absences
  - attendance
  - real retention
  - early school leavers who are not in education, training or employment (NEET)
  - local school-based data collections including those that collect student voice, measure wellbeing etc.
  - School Opinion Survey measures.





# CONSIDER

## Leader

- ▶ Does your school have systems for collecting and analysing aggregate school-level data to gain insights into engagement? Are there established routines for discussing this data?
- ▶ How is student voice captured in your student data to inform priorities and practices?
- ▶ When data is shared, how is student privacy and dignity maintained?

## School team

- ▶ How do you use student-level data to build your understanding of each student and their academic progress and engagement needs?
- ▶ How is this data used to inform whole-team approaches to support every student's engagement and achievement?
- ▶ How do you access student- and school-level data to monitor student outcomes?

# Investing for student engagement and outcomes

Schools that prioritise engagement and achievement for every student allocate their finite physical, financial and human resources to ensure the greatest impact. These schools view student engagement and achievement as an investment priority and establish processes to facilitate sound investment decisions.

Every school is different and has different resources so each school's use and distribution of resources will be unique. Contextual factors and a deep understanding of the student cohort, community and quality teaching and engagement practices will influence where schools invest resources in regards to student engagement and academic achievement.

Evidence shows schools achieving high levels of both engagement and academic success demonstrate precision in the allocation of their resources to ensure their staff and students can overcome barriers to engagement. These schools are flexible in finding solutions and opportunities to enhance their practice.



**The key enabler I think is to really interrogate your data to look at what are your areas of need for school, then develop a strategic vision in line with your priorities. That way you can target individual resources. Now the cake doesn't get any bigger, it is just how you handle it.**

*School principal*



## OBSERVABLE PRACTICES

- ▶ The school has the courage to adjust established structures to respond to student needs.
- ▶ Resources, processes and how time and effort are expended are well aligned for achieving the engagement and achievement of every student.
- ▶ The school has a clear and transparent decision-making process for allocating resources which is understood across the whole school team.
- ▶ The school's teams understand everyone's role and how they work together.
- ▶ The school has clear and efficient processes for referring vulnerable students to specialist team members, including the right thresholds and triggers for referral.
- ▶ The school uses parent and community resources are utilised to achieve commitment and investment in engagement and attainment for all students.



## CONSIDER

### **Leader**

- ▶ How does your school use existing resources to achieve the best outcomes for every student? For example, team structure, recognition of internal expertise and time management?
- ▶ Does your school have a transparent decision-making process for resource allocation? If not, how can you ensure your decision-making process is clearly communicated to, and understood by, school staff (and parents and students where necessary)?
- ▶ How does your school evaluate its resource use to ensure it is delivering the most efficient practices for supporting engagement and academic success for its student cohort?
- ▶ How does your school use evaluations and data to plan future resource allocation?

### **School team**

- ▶ How do you prepare an evidence base to support a proposal and request for resource allocations?
- ▶ How do you evaluate the success of investments made?
- ▶ Does your school have an effective process for referring vulnerable students to see specialist team members, including the right thresholds and triggers for referral?

## Quality environments for learning and engagement

High-quality environments for engagement and learning ensure students feel valued, safe and experience a sense of connection and worth about their learning experience. Students feel engaged when the curriculum is connected to their lives and experiences.

Schools that achieve both engagement and academic outcomes create a quality environment for learning and engagement to meet students' cognitive, emotional and physical needs. This includes building students' self-management, resilience, learning stamina, awareness, empathy and relationship skills. It also requires high-quality teaching that builds strong cognitive skills and knowledge and is marked by high expectations and aspirations for every student.



**A good learning environment raises student expectations, encourages them to participate, and ensures that no student can fly under the radar. Get it right, and students will thrive in the class; they may even love it. Get it wrong, and the classroom can become a place of stress, infecting the teacher and the students.**

*Grattan Institute, 2017*



## OBSERVABLE PRACTICES

- ▶ Teachers create a learning environment in which all students are engaged, challenged, feel safe to take risks.
- ▶ The school affords every student the 'dignity of risk' to learn, especially students requiring intensive support.
- ▶ Teachers feel passionate about their curriculum area as a means to engage students and maximise student achievement.
- ▶ Teachers are equipped to build students' learning stamina, resilience and belief in their capacity to learn successfully.
- ▶ Flexibility and differentiation is applied to achieve the engagement of every student, with allowances afforded based on individual student circumstances.
- ▶ Every student knows they can approach their teacher if they are not coping.
- ▶ Student effort and learning is recognised and rewarded.



## CONSIDER

### Leader

- ▶ How does your school ensure students feel valued as a whole and not only as a result of their grades?
- ▶ How has your school supported and encouraged teacher passion for the curriculum?
- ▶ How does your school support all staff to prioritise student wellbeing?
- ▶ What does your school do to build quality teaching skills across the school to help engage every student?

### School team

- ▶ How do you ensure the learning environments you create are inclusive and engaging and can meet the needs of all students?
- ▶ How does your school strengthen students' learning and personal relational skills?
- ▶ Does your school use individual plans to identify where differentiation is required for students to engage and achieve?

## Meaningful connections for engagement and achievement

The capacity of staff to develop meaningful relationships with their students helps improve student engagement and academic achievement in schools. Students who have constructive relationships with their teachers are more likely to do well at school and teachers who actively build such relationships can have a strong effect on the lives of their students. Positive teacher and student relationships can help students to feel positive about class and about school in general. These students are also more willing to ‘have a go’ at challenging work, to risk making mistakes, and to ask for help when they need it.

Research has also established that continued parent engagement throughout a student’s schooling leads to greater academic, social and emotional outcomes. More specifically, the research shows that effective parent engagement needs to stretch beyond just trusting relationships. Schools require the capability to work with parents to build their positive beliefs about their child’s learning, and to support strong aspirations for their child. Schools also need to bridge the divide between school and home, supporting parents to understand the culture of school and the language of learning.



**All teachers can have a relationship with students.  
It’s not just the guidance officer and the deans of  
students; it’s every teacher.**

*Assistant Regional Director, South-East Region*



## OBSERVABLE PRACTICES

- ▶ Teachers show they believe every student can succeed and build aspiration for their students, including students who are not maximising their potential due to a range of issues.
- ▶ The school establishes a point of connection with every student, including those most at risk of disengaging, creating a sense of belonging for every student.
- ▶ Teachers validate and embrace student voice, agency and leadership.
- ▶ Teachers are compassionate, have a sense of humour and are giving of themselves.
- ▶ Teachers are respectful of students, their families and culture.
- ▶ All staff communicate effectively with parents to engage them in their child's learning and the school community, including those students experiencing multiple and complex barriers to their engagement and learning.
- ▶ Teachers have high expectations of students and share these expectations with students and their parents.



## CONSIDER

### Leader

- ▶ What actions in your school demonstrate that your staff believe every student can succeed?
- ▶ Does your school ensure every student has a point of trustful connection with an adult?
- ▶ How are students and parents invited to build meaningful relationships with staff?

### School team

- ▶ How do you build aspirations for young people with low self-aspirations, drawing on students' own skills, passions and feedback?
- ▶ How do you engage parents to build positive beliefs about their child's learning?

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