STRONG RESPONSES

to students who are disengaged or at risk of disengagement

Alignment with the National School Improvement Tool

All schooling sectors aim to achieve high-quality outcomes for their students. There is a good deal of research on what works in schools, including high-quality mainstream schools, as well as other alternative settings such as special assistance schools, flexi-schools, positive learning centres and other approaches.

Based on this research, the National School Improvement Tool (**www.acer.org/files/NSIT.pdf**) provides an overview of what works to drive school improvement. This research provides an important touchstone for all school settings, including alternative settings.

1. Explicit improvement agenda

The school leadership team or governing body have established and are driving a strong improvement agenda for the school, including those students who are most at risk. Approaches to support students who are at risk of disengaging explicit are grounded in evidence from research and practice, and expressed in terms of improvements in measurable student outcomes. Explicit and clear school-wide targets for improvement in engagement for all students have been set and communicated to parents and families, teachers and students, with accompanying timelines.

Like all schools, alternative settings are determined to continuously focus on improvement. Second chance schools do not have to be "second best".

High aspirations for all students are at the centre of successful and inclusive schools. Research points to the key role played by aspirations and the need to create a climate of achievement through effective leadership and a high level of teacher commitment and expectations for student learning for all students (Lamb & Rice, 2008).

With respect to improving school engagement and completion for at-risk students, "the elements of school culture central to maximising student engagement and retention include … a drive for continuous improvement." (McGregor, Mills & Thomson, 2012).

Extracted from *EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS: Student engagement and re-engagement in Queensland schools*

2. Analysis and discussion of data

A high priority is given to the school-wide analysis and discussion of systematically collected data on student outcomes, including academic, attendance and behavioural outcomes, retention of students to Year 12, student wellbeing, and post school destinations. Data analyses consider overall school performance, as well as the performances of students who are highly at risk of disengaging; evidence of improvement/regression over time; performances in comparison with similar schools; and, in the case of data from standardised tests, measures of growth across the years of school.

Inclusive and alternative settings focus on achieving outcomes for their students. They pay attention to academic, attendance, behavioural, wellbeing, retention and transition data. This can support identification of early warning signs and inform timely intervention. Well-compiled data also improves the understanding of the individual student's progress and future needs, and provides insights into the effectiveness of programs and approaches across the student cohort (see, for example, McGregor & Mills, 2012).

All school (alternative and mainstream) settings consider each of these datasets separately and together in order to gather insights into student gains, and into areas where there is room for improvement.

3. A culture that promotes learning

The school is driven by a deep belief that every student is capable of successful learning. A high priority is given to building and maintaining positive and caring relationships between staff, students and parents. This explicitly includes students who are most at risk of disengaging and their parents. There is a strong collegial culture of mutual trust and support among teachers and school leaders, and parents are treated as partners in the promotion of student learning and wellbeing, including parents who experience challenges engaging with schools. The school works to maintain a learning environment that is safe, respectful, tolerant and inclusive, and that promotes intellectual rigour.

4. Targeted use of school resources

The school applies its resources (staff time, expertise, funds, facilities, materials) in a targeted manner to meet the learning and wellbeing needs of all students. It has school-wide policies, practices and programs to assist in identifying and addressing student needs. Flexible structures and processes enable the school to respond appropriately to the needs of individual students.

Research shows that students, particularly students who are disengaging, need more individualised attention at school. Teaching strategies, classroom environments and wrap-around support differ according to the circumstances of the at-risk student. The most effective education settings recognise the need to apply their resources appropriately to best meet the learning and wellbeing needs of students. School staff work in multidisciplinary teams to support at risk students, rather than operating in silos (see, for example, Lamb & Rice, 2008).

A wide range of researchers report on the importance of providing disengaged and students at risk of disengaging with supportive environments that combine a focus on wellbeing with a focus on learning. "Unless the former are being addressed, the latter will not happen" (Wierenga & Taylor, 2015, p. 18).

5. An expert teaching team

The school has found ways to build a school-wide, professional team of highly able teachers, including teachers who take an active leadership role beyond the classroom. Strong procedures are in place to encourage a school-wide, shared responsibility for student learning and success, and to develop a culture of continuous professional improvement that includes classroom-based learning, mentoring and coaching arrangements. Expert teams know how to build wellbeing and learning at the same time. This includes building learning stamina, concentration, metacognition as well as resilience and wellbeing.

Research points to the vital role that "the right kind of teacher" plays in meeting the needs of all students, particularly those who are disengaged or at risk of disengagement .

6. Systematic curriculum delivery

The school has a coherent plan for curriculum delivery that ensures consistent teaching and learning expectations and a clear reference for monitoring learning across the year levels. The plan reflects high expectations for all students, and provides opportunities for all students to access the Australian Curriculum. The plan comprises evidence-based teaching practices aligned with assessment and reporting procedures and has been developed with reference to the Australian Curriculum or other approved curricula and refined collaboratively to provide a shared vision for curriculum practice. This plan is shared with parents and families.

Research suggests that diverse and flexible curriculum offerings are essential for student engagement and retention in alternative settings.

"For school programs to engage learners, they need to be challenging, stimulating, involve opportunities for sharing learning tasks, be satisfying as learning experiences, and have clear and demonstrable benefits beyond school." (Lamb et al., 2004).

7. Differentiated teaching and learning

The school places a high priority on ensuring that, in its day-to-day teaching, classroom teachers identify and address the learning needs of individual students, including students who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging.

Teachers are encouraged and supported to monitor closely the progress of individual students, identify learning difficulties and tailor classroom activities to different levels of readiness and need.

Like all students, children and young people at risk have a wide variety of different learning needs, interests and learning preferences. Effective teachers have clear academic standards and high expectations for their students at risk of disengaging. They provide appropriate scaffolding to support students in their learning and flexible and individualised support (see, for example, Te Riele, 2014).

8. Effective pedagogical practices

The school principal and other school leaders recognise that highly effective teaching is the key to improving student learning throughout the school. This is particularly so for students who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging. They take a strong leadership role, encouraging the use of research-based teaching practices in all classrooms to ensure that every student is engaged, challenged and learning successfully. All teachers understand and use effective teaching methods, including explicit instruction, to maximise student learning.

Children and young people who are at risk of disengagement benefit from clarity about what they are expected to learn, individualised attention to support them to learn, and timely feedback. The highly effective teacher will customise instructional approaches to suit the learning needs of the student, while at the same time using evidence-based teaching strategies that work (Lamb & Rice, 2008).

9. School–community partnerships

The school seeks ways to enhance student learning and wellbeing by partnering with parents and families, other education and training institutions, local businesses and community organisations. Parents and families are recognised as integral members of the school community and partners in their children's education. Partnerships are strategically established to address identified student needs and operate by providing access to experiences, support and intellectual or physical resources not available within the school.

All partners are committed to the common purposes and goals of partnership activities. There are procedures to ensure effective communications, and to monitor and evaluate the intended impacts of the school's partnerships.

Students who are at risk of disengagement often face complex and multiple barriers. Respectful and authentic engagement with their parents and carers can be profoundly effective in supporting vulnerable children and young people and their families, and in maintaining student engagement.