



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia



Speaking Out About School and Learning



The views of WA children and young people on factors that support their engagement in school and learning

January 2018

Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

The Commissioner for Children and Young People WA acknowledges the unique contribution of Aboriginal people's culture and heritage to Western Australian society. For the purposes of this report, the term 'Aboriginal' encompasses Western Australia's diverse language groups and also recognises those of Torres Strait Islander descent. The use of the term 'Aboriginal' in this way is not intended to imply equivalence between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, though similarities do exist.

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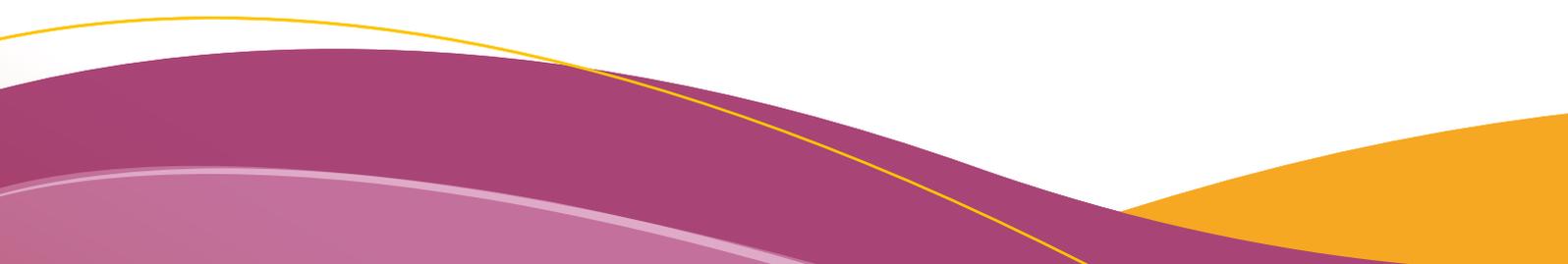
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The images of Western Australian school children used in this report are generic and do not infer a particular school or student's involvement in the School and Learning Consultation.



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Message from the Commissioner

The evidence provided by the 1,812 West Australian school students who participated in this consultation is both compelling and thought provoking.

The student engagement framework developed out of the report identifies nine factors that influence a student's level of engagement in school and learning and the complex interplay these factors have on each other and overall engagement.

While reaffirming that the approaches within our schools meet the needs of most children and young people much of the time, the students' accounts also clearly identify areas for significant improvement that cannot be ignored. This is across all school sectors – government and non-government – and across a range of issues such as bullying, behaviour management, pedagogy and curriculum.

The findings also show that students, families, teachers and school staff, education administrators, governing authorities¹ and academics all have a role to play in creating the optimum learning environment for children and young people.

This report highlights a number of areas within education that require further research and exploration to test and better understand the impact of current approaches to engaging children and young people faced with a rapidly changing world.

Through the consultation, Aboriginal children and young people, children and young people with long-term health problems or disability, and males in regional schools identified specific issues

that impact on their learning and engagement with education that urgently require greater attention. Within the context of this report, these children and young people are particularly vulnerable and the issues they experience require deeper consideration.

This will be a continuing area of advocacy for my office, and I will be working with schools and governing authorities to respond to the views expressed by students in this and previous consultations. I also plan to develop a series of policy briefs to further explore issues arising in the data to guide and assist decision-makers and teachers.

Schools are very busy environments with increasingly more demands placed on them to respond to a range of societal issues and educational needs. Much effort has been put into developing resources, frameworks, policies and programs to support and engage students. This work is important and has helped many students, but this report shows there is more to be done to create a truly responsive and equitable education system. I look forward to working with all school sectors to achieve this.

I will also monitor and report on progress on the recommendations of this report to ensure children and young people's views are respected and result in practical improvements for all WA students.

My thanks to all the school staff and students who participated in this project, your effort and insight has been invaluable.

Colin Pettit

Commissioner for Children and Young People

¹ The information and recommendations in this report apply to government and non-government schools. The term 'governing authority' is used to describe the decision-making bodies that have oversight of the education system in WA and includes the Department of Education in its recently amalgamated form and, where separate governance is responsible, the Catholic Education Office, the Association of Independent Schools WA and individual governing bodies of independent schools.



About the Commissioner

The Commissioner for Children and Young People is the independent advocate for all children and young people in WA aged less than 18 years.

The role of the Commissioner is described in the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006*. The Act requires the Commissioner to give priority to, and have special regard for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

The Commissioner talks to children and young people and others in the community about what children and young people need to be healthy and reach their potential, and considers research and evidence about children's wellbeing.

From this information the Commissioner works with children and young people, their families and government to improve policies, legislation and services that support children and young people's wellbeing.

Introduction

Why focus on engagement in education?

Education is a key influence on a child's life. Early engagement with school and education assists a child to develop skills to succeed academically and build and maintain social relationships.

Schooling has a strong influence on a child's future pathway into employment and further education.² Children and young people have also identified that getting a 'good education' is important to their wellbeing and future opportunities.

Research shows poor engagement with school may result in poor educational outcomes, diminished employment prospects and, for some, adverse life outcomes, including social exclusion, poverty and involvement with the justice system.³

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children and young people have the right to accessible education and should be encouraged to reach the highest level of education of which they are capable.⁴

The difficulties some WA children and young people experience in attending school and having a positive educational experience have often been raised with the Commissioner in his discussions with parents and professionals in both regional communities and metropolitan Perth.

When speaking to the Commissioner, children and young people have also expressed concerns that some of their peers do not participate positively in school, which can either mean that some do not regularly attend school and others attend but disrupt learning for fellow students.

To gain a broader understanding of the issues influencing engagement in education, in 2015 the Commissioner published a literature review, *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school*.⁵

One of the key issues identified in the literature review was that children and young people's views on school and learning and their experiences of education are largely absent from research on student's engagement and disengagement.

Understanding children and young people's views on what factors influence their engagement or disengagement from school and learning is critical to improving educational outcomes for all Western Australian students.

Overview of the School and Learning Consultation

During July to November 2016, the Commissioner for Children and Young People undertook the office's most complex research project to date, the School and Learning Consultation.

The purpose of the research was to seek the views of Year 3 to Year 12 students enrolled in government, Catholic and independent schools across WA on the positive and negative factors that influence their engagement in education.

The research comprised two components: an individual electronic student survey and group discussions with students facilitated by the Commissioner's staff.

² Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People.

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015, *Australia's welfare 2015*, Australia's Welfare Series No. 12, Cat. No. AUS 189, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

⁴ United Nations 1989, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Articles 28 and 29, United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner.

⁵ Hancock K & Zubrick S 2015, *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

The survey enabled a large number of children and young people to participate in the consultation, with the group discussions allowing children and young people to express more wide-ranging and in-depth views on school and learning.

The survey questions were drawn from the New Zealand Youth 2000 Survey⁶ and adapted to the Western Australian context, for a younger cohort of students and for students with disability attending education support centres. Each version of the survey was slightly different, meaning that the different cohorts of students were not asked all the same questions.

Both the survey and group discussions were designed to canvas a broad range of factors identified by the literature review as associated with engagement and disengagement including:

- relationships with staff and students
- curriculum content
- safety
- health
- academic achievement
- attendance
- help and support
- pedagogy
- participation in school activities
- family situation and involvement.

Framing a discussion around engagement

The Commissioner's 2015 literature review showed a student's engagement or disengagement with school and learning is complex and influenced by multiple factors.

The literature review identified the following concepts as being core to understanding the complexity surrounding student engagement or disengagement:

- Students can be disengaged at different levels (e.g. with content, in class, with school, and/or with education as a whole).

- There are different types or domains of engagement (e.g. emotional, behavioural, and cognitive).
- Where levels of disengagement intersect with types of disengagement, different indicators of disengagement can be identified (e.g. behavioural disengagement with class content may be indicated by poor classroom behaviour; emotional disengagement with school in general may be indicated by poor school connectedness). Disengagement can therefore be indicated and measured in multiple ways.
- Disengagement is both a process and an outcome. For example, student absenteeism may reflect disengagement from school, but it is also a risk factor for other disengagement indicators such as early school leaving.
- Contexts beyond the educational setting (i.e. family) are an integral part of disengagement processes for children and young people.

Four elements emerged from the consultation as clear indicators of a participant's engagement in school and learning:

1. attendance
2. academic achievement
3. liking school
4. sense of belonging at school (indicators 3 and 4 were combined for Year 3 to Year 6 students, to make them easy to understand).

These indicators provide a sufficiently broad 'definition' of engagement, identifying, for example, that even if a student attends school and achieves well, they may not be fully engaged or achieving maximum value from their education if they do not enjoy school or feel as though they belong.

By analysing participants' comments in relation to these four indicators, the consultation was able to identify what factors had the most influence on their engagement.

⁶ Adolescent Health Research Group 2012, *Youth '12 National Health and Wellbeing Survey of New Zealand Secondary School Students: Questionnaire*, University of Auckland, Auckland.

Profile of participants

In total, 1,812 students from 98 schools participated in the survey and 1,174 students participated in the group discussions. Schools from all nine geographic regions of WA were involved.

Participation by students in the consultation was anonymous and voluntary. Active student and parent/guardian consent was required for participation in the consultation.

In addition to the student survey and discussion groups, parents/guardians of students who agreed to take part in the consultation were also given the opportunity to provide their views via an online survey. In total, 421 parents/guardians participated in the survey.

Students in Year 3 to Year 6

A total of 954 Year 3 to Year 6 students participated in the School and Learning Consultation survey.

- 58 per cent female and 42 per cent male
- 60 per cent attended a metropolitan school and 40 per cent a regional school
- Nine per cent identified as Aboriginal (76% attended school in a regional and 24% in a metropolitan area)
- 18 per cent were born in a country other than Australia.

Students in Year 7 to Year 12

A total of 837 Year 7 to Year 12 students participated in the School and Learning Consultation survey.

- 57 per cent female, 42 per cent male and 1 per cent identifying as other
- 70 per cent attended a metropolitan school and 30 per cent a regional school
- Six per cent identified as Aboriginal (67% attended school in a regional and 33% attended in a metropolitan area)
- 23 per cent of participants were born in a country other than Australia.

Students attending education support centres

In total, 21 students in Year 3 to Year 12 attending an education support centre participated in the School and Learning Consultation survey. Due to the small sample size, the discussion of findings is descriptive and focuses on outlining broad trends only.

One-quarter of students in education support centres were born outside of Australia and reported that their parents spoke a language other than English at home.

No Aboriginal students attending an education support centre participated in the survey.

What did students say about their engagement?

Attendance

- Three-quarters of Year 3 to Year 6 students and two-thirds of Year 7 to Year 12 students reported that it is very important to them to be at school every day.
- 24 per cent of Year 3 to Year 6 students said they 'worry lots' if they miss school, 55 per cent said they 'worry a little'.
- 12 per cent of Year 7 to Year 12 students reported 'wagging' school for a full day or more in the current school year.
- All students attending education support centres said it was important to them to be at school every day.

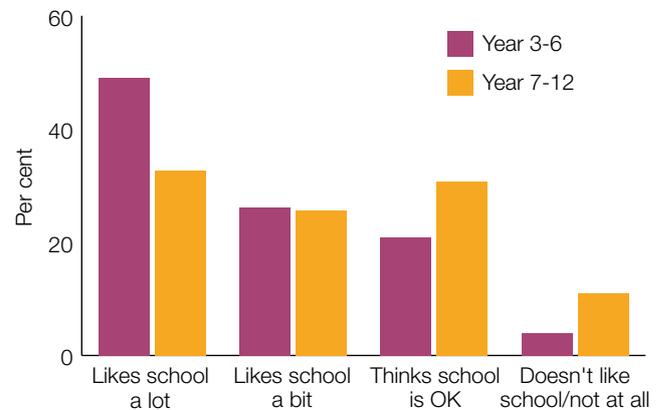
Academic achievement

- 49 per cent of Year 3 to Year 6 students said they do well or very well in their school results and 65 per cent of Year 7 to Year 12 students reported that their school results are above average or near the top.
- 59 per cent of Year 7 to Year 12 students reported that it is 'very important' to them to be proud of their school work and 37 per cent said it is 'somewhat important'.

Liking school and sense of belonging

- One-half of Year 3 to Year 6 students and one-third of Year 7 to Year 12 students said they like school 'a lot'.
- Three-quarters of Year 7 to Year 12 students said they feel like they are part of their school.
- One-half of students attending education support centres reported liking school 'a lot'.

Graph 1: Proportion of participating students liking school a lot, a bit, saying school is OK or not liking school, by year level



Links to School and Learning Consultation – Technical Report

- Chapter 1 – Profile statistics
- Chapter 2 – Engagement indicators
- Chapter 8 – Parents' views



Factors that children and young people say influence their engagement

Through the consultation, children and young people identified nine factors that influence their engagement in school and learning, which have been divided into two categories, namely primary and secondary factors.

Primary factors

These three factors provide the **foundation** for a student's sound and sustainable engagement in school and learning. While engagement in learning can be improved through other means, the primary factors provide crucial **supportive relationships** that enable students to develop positive attitudes towards education and cope with adversity and challenges that arise.

Secondary factors

These six factors can **accelerate** engagement by supporting the student to be ready to learn and intrinsically motivated. These factors have two sub-categories:

1. Learning – The learning environment and the way that content is developed and delivered.
2. Student – Managing the physical and emotional health of the student so that a focus on learning is maximised.

Level of engagement

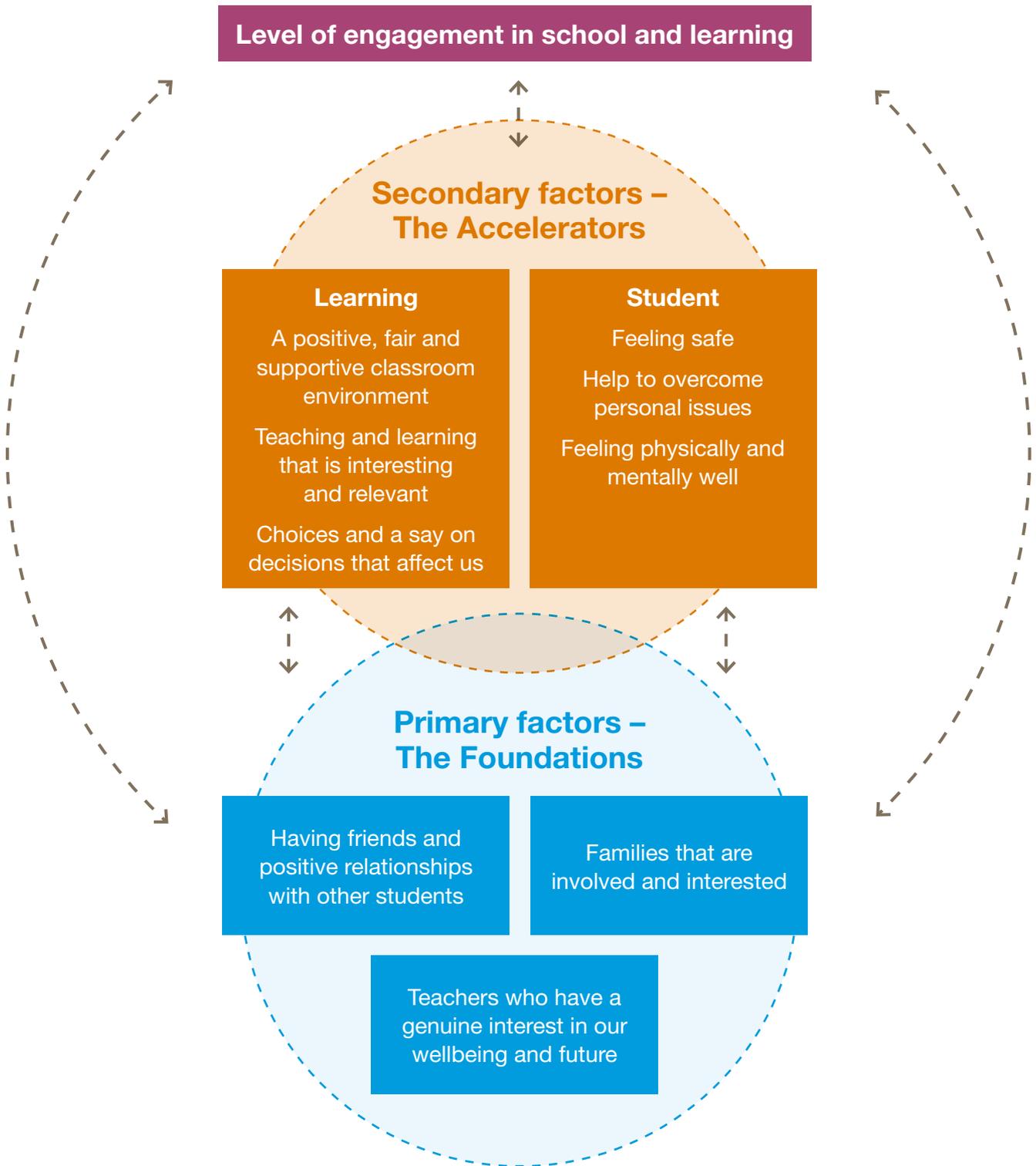
The following four elements have been used to measure students' level of engagement in school and learning:

1. attendance
2. academic achievement
3. liking school
4. sense of belonging at school (indicators 3 and 4 were combined for Year 3 to Year 6 students, to make them easy to understand).

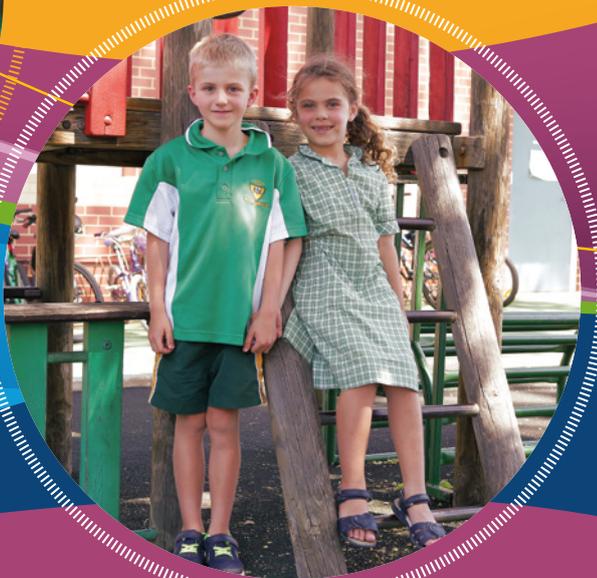


The Student Engagement Framework

These nine factors and their inter-relatedness can be described with the following model:



Primary Factors - The Foundations





- 1. Having friends and positive relationships with other students**
- 2. Teachers who have a genuine interest in our wellbeing and future**
- 3. Families that are involved and interested**

Quality interpersonal relationships have been identified through the consultation as the foundation for students' engagement with school and learning. Relationships foster in students a sense of belonging and of feeling valued. Through relationships, students are more likely to develop patterns of persistence and motivation, and have access to a support network.

When listening to students' experiences of school, the formation and maintenance of relationships with friends, other students, teachers and other school staff emerge as powerful factors affecting students' engagement at school. In addition, the relationships students have with their own family and their views and opinions on school and learning are another critical factor for student engagement.

Analysis of the data provided by students in the survey clearly indicates that students who have strong relationships with peers, teachers and their family are much more likely to do well against the engagement indicators of liking school, sense of belonging at school, attendance and academic achievement.

The quality of the relationships that students have with their teachers is particularly critical. For some students it can be a protective factor against less positive relationships with other students or family. In other words, students who do not always get along with other students or have a disruptive family background can achieve good engagement outcomes if they have positive relationships with their teachers.

1. Having friends and positive relationships with other students

School provides students with opportunities to socialise with other students and, as such, students' experiences of school are highly relational. Throughout the consultation, students indicated overwhelmingly that it was important to have friends at school and they described a variety of ways in which friends influenced their education. Students described friendships as:

- playing an important role in academic, social and personal development
- a source of encouragement for persistence and confidence with schooling
- an essential source of support, providing understanding and advice and someone to talk to and trust
- positively contributing to wellbeing, mental health and self-concept
- critical for feeling happy, comfortable, safe and accepted at school
- a protective factor against bullying.

In addition to friendships at school, students recognised the importance of getting along and having positive relationships with their peers more broadly. They explained if everyone gets along then school is 'easier' for students and teachers and everyone is 'happy'.

All of these factors influenced the attitudes and behaviours of students towards school and learning thereby directly enabling positive engagement outcomes.

[Friends] are important because it makes learning more enjoyable and somewhat easier.

[With friends] you will have more confidence and try harder to do new things and try harder at school.

[Friends] make you want to come to school more.

[Friends] work together to solve work.

For some students however friends were not necessarily important at school. These students described how sometimes friends can be a distraction from learning, can be a negative influence or may not be supportive:

No, it is easier to get through school without distractions.

Not really – friendships change over time, it's important not to be antagonistic to other people, but having friends isn't that important.

Survey data

→ **83 per cent** of Year 3 to Year 6 students and **85 per cent** of Year 7 to Year 12 students said they like school because of seeing their friends.

→ More than **three-quarters** of all students said they usually get along with their peers.

But:

→ Aboriginal students were less likely than non-Aboriginal students to say they get along with other students – **two-thirds** (66.7%) of Aboriginal Year 3 to Year 6 students and only **one-half** (54%) of Aboriginal Year 7 to Year 12 students said they usually get along with their peers.

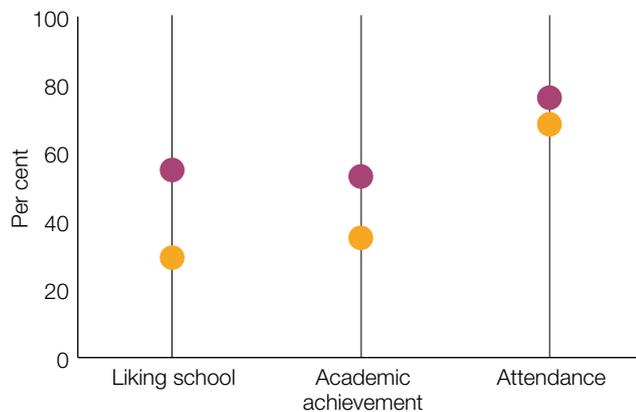
→ **One-third** of Year 7 to Year 12 students said that students in their school have trouble getting along with each other.

Influence on engagement

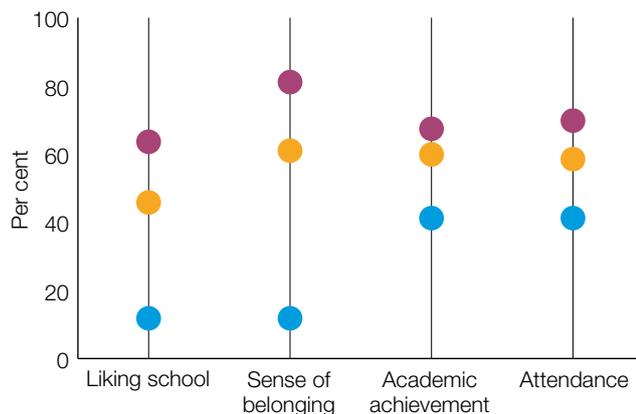
Students who have positive relationships with their peers are more likely to enjoy school and feel they are part of their school. These students are also more likely to achieve higher academic results and to value regular attendance, however, these differences are not as pronounced as with the first two outcomes.

The following graphs show how the quality of student-peer relationships influences a range of engagement indicators:

Graph 2: Selected engagement indicators for Year 3 to Year 6 students who get along with peers most of the time or sometimes or less



Graph 3: Selected engagement indicators for Year 7 to Year 12 students who get along with peers usually, sometimes or hardly ever/not at all



Views of parents

The responses from parents underscored the importance of quality friendships at school, highlighting the range of ways these relationships influence engagement with school and learning.

He is happy to go to school and happy within himself. Has lots of friends [...].

In contrast to the comments from students, parents did not comment on the importance of friendships for learning, whereas students spoke extensively and strongly on this aspect of schooling.

Suggestions by students

- Schools and school staff to provide more opportunities to see and work with friends. Specific examples included learning experiences such as group work or mixed-class activities, longer lunch breaks and collaborative activities such as whole-of-school events and team building activities.
- Schools to promote positive relationships through specific rules and programs, the modelling of good behaviour, opportunities for different groups of students to spend time together (different ages or sections of the school), and support to develop and navigate friendships (especially in Year 3 to Year 6).

Links to School and Learning Consultation – Technical Report

- Chapter 3.1 – Having friends and positive relationships with other students
- Chapter 4.7 – Help to overcome personal issues
- Chapter 7 – Aboriginal students – comparative survey findings
- Chapter 8 – Parents' views

2. Teachers who have a genuine interest in our wellbeing and future

Teachers strongly influenced students' experiences of school and learning. Students expressed clear views about the actions and characteristics of teachers, preferring those who worked to build relationships with students. Respectful, trusting relationships where teachers took an interest in students and demonstrated understanding of their personal situations and needs meant that students were more likely to feel comfortable and engage in learning.

... | *They check in on you if something is bothering you.*

... | *Care about personal things – make you feel noticed.*

... | *They talk to you about other things not just school work. They include you in conversations and they smile.*

Students largely spoke of their relationships and experiences with teachers as dichotomous in nature – positive relationships meant enjoyable school experiences, whereas poor relationships contributed to negative experiences of school. Teachers who showed an interest in students, encouraged them and were welcoming, caring and nice were preferred by students.

... | *He is easy to get along with and he is easy to talk to and he makes an effort to take an interest in you.*

... | *They listen to you.*

... | *The teacher I like is very helpful, makes me feel comfortable and helps me throughout the situation I'm in.*

... | *They help me be confident about who I am.*

Teachers who were critical, dismissive or in conflict with students negatively affected student motivation, level of comfort, perception of available support and help-seeking behaviour. Additionally, students felt targeted and more likely to get into trouble irrespective of whether they had done anything wrong.

... | *So you're not on your teacher's bad side.*

... | *Because if you don't get along with them you will get in trouble a lot.*

For students in Year 7 to Year 12, it was particularly important that relationships were underpinned by mutual respect and teachers treated them more like adults.

... | *[I like teachers who] treat us like adults not kids, to help us when we leave school.*

Notably, students also acknowledged their role in supporting positive relationships with school staff.

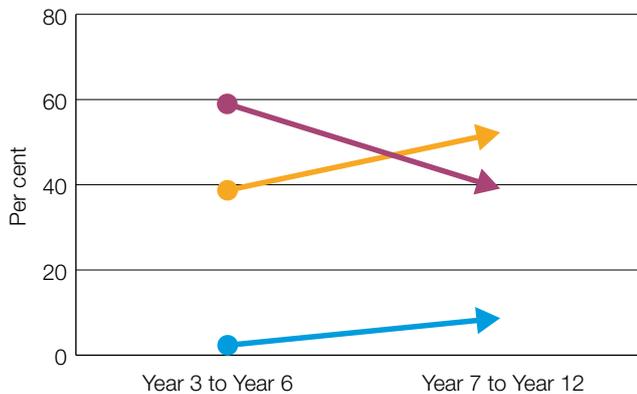
... | *A bit more support from the students, not degrading teachers before they even do anything to them.*

Survey data

- Around **two-thirds** of students in Year 3 to Year 6 said they always get along with their teacher and around **three-quarters** of Year 7 to Year 12 students said they usually get along with their teachers.
- Male students in all year levels were **less likely** than female students to say that they always or usually get along with their teachers.

The following graph shows how much students think that teachers and other school staff care about them:

Graph 4: Change in the proportion of students feeling that teachers care a lot, some or not at all, by year level



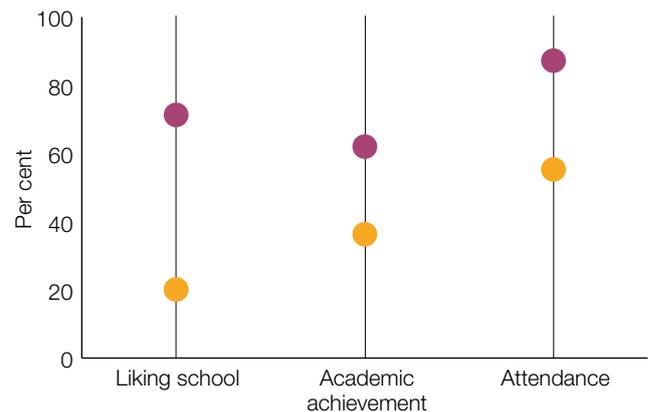
A significantly larger proportion of Year 3 to Year 6 students (60%) than Year 7 to Year 12 students (40%) reported they feel that school staff care a lot about them. Correspondingly, the proportion of students saying they feel that teachers do not care at all about them was higher among the older cohort (9% compared to 2%).

Influence on engagement

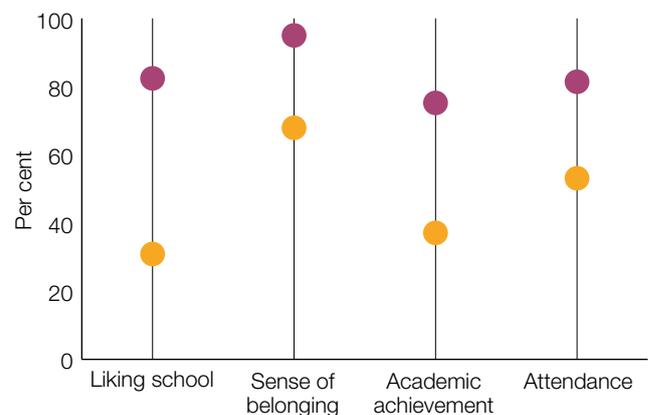
Students who have positive relationships with their teachers are more likely to like school and feel like they are part of their school. They are also more likely to achieve higher academic results and to value regular attendance.

The following graphs show how the quality of teacher-student relationships influences a range of engagement indicators:

Graph 5: Selected engagement indicators for Year 3 to Year 6 students who always get along with teachers and feel that teachers care a lot or who get along with teachers sometimes and feel that teachers care some



Graph 6: Selected engagement indicators for Year 7 to Year 12 students who usually get along with teachers and feel that teachers care a lot or who get along with teachers sometimes and feel that teachers care some



Suggestions from students

- More respectful and caring school staff who show genuine interest in students and their wellbeing. This included teachers taking the time to have conversations with students about more than school work, to demonstrate mutual respect, valuing student's ideas, being supportive and approachable, and treating all students fairly.
- More school staff to work in ways that create the optimal environments for engagement with learning. That is, school staff who were enthusiastic about teaching, employed engaging and effective pedagogy, worked to understand students, were relaxed, approachable and consistent, and provided encouragement with regard to learning. Students explained these characteristics supported learning, engagement and the relationships between students and school staff.

- Initiatives organised by schools that provide opportunities to further develop relationships with school staff such as specific time spent together (time to talk, introductory lessons, teacher-student morning teas), collaborative activities (sports, competitions or excursions) and extra-curricular activities (clubs, socials or projects).
- Students to demonstrate respect towards school staff.

Links to School and Learning Consultation – Technical Report

- Chapter 3.2 – Teachers who have a genuine interest in our wellbeing and future
- Chapter 4.1 – A positive and fair classroom environment
- Chapter 4.2 – A supportive classroom environment



3. Families who are involved and interested

The attitudes and behaviours of family members influenced student engagement with school and learning for students across all year levels. Students described the varied ways in which family members acted that were both supportive and unsupportive of their engagement, noting that a range of factors came into play, which also enabled or constrained family members' actions.

Family members were noted as positively influencing engagement with school and learning when they:

- show interest in and encourage learning progress (not just academic achievement)
- provide motivation, understanding and support with practical, emotional and academic matters
- directly participate in school activities or communicate with the school regarding learning.

Students valued family members taking an active interest in their life through proactively asking about school, learning and how they feel and, critically, listening to their response and respecting their views. These actions showed family members cared about students and their learning, and emphasised the importance of learning and school. Importantly, this was not about family members knowing the answers to homework questions for example, but about spending quality time talking and listening to the student.

... *Asking them [students] how they feel about their work.*

... *Have an interest in what their kids are doing in school.*

... *Working as a family. Supporting one another helps build a stronger education for the child, because feeling loved can encourage the student to do better in school work.*

... *Sit down with us and we can work things out together.*

... *Families can be a big impact in people's lives and hurt and make people happy.*

Conversely, when family members did not show an active interest, students presumed the family member/s did not care about them, their wellbeing, their education or their future.

... *Don't spend time with you and don't really care about what you do or help with anything.*

... *If they don't come to school events or talk about what you're doing in school, it can be quite hurtful and feel like they don't care about your education.*

Importantly, negative comments from family about school, learning, school staff or fellow students were seen as unhelpful. Students felt stressed or unsupported when there was a disjuncture or disagreement between family members and others at school.

Balancing interest and expectations

Family members with high expectations for students were seen as a positive influence for school and learning. Students were careful to temper comments regarding high expectations with provisos such that high expectations must be related to the student's ability and interest, and facilitated by support from family members.

Comparisons to peers or setting high expectations in areas not of interest to students were described as unhelpful, as was excessive pressure from family members to do well or achieve high grades.

When family members had "overly high expectations" (Year 7 to 12 student) academically and in other aspects of their lives, students described feeling anxious, stressed and pressured, particularly when the expectations seemed unattainable. Students feared disappointing their family members and this affected their self-confidence and self-esteem.

... | *They repetitively say you have to get A+ on all subjects.*

... | *Knowing their child's ability not what someone else can do.*

... | *Pressure excellence making someone stressed or anxious not to disappoint.*

Survey data

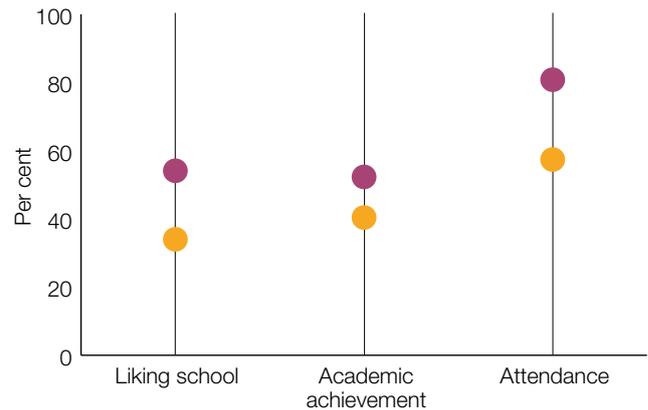
- **86 per cent** of Year 3 to Year 6 students and **76 per cent** of Year 7 to Year 12 students reported that it is very important to their family that they go to school every day.
- **One-half** of all students reported that their family often asks about their school work.
- **86 per cent** of Year 3 to Year 6 students and **66 per cent** of Year 7 to Year 12 students reported that their family participates in school activities or events.

Influence on engagement

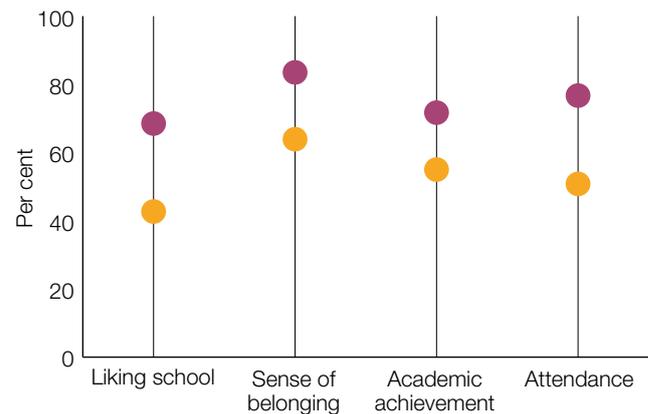
Students with families who were involved and interested were more likely to like school, feel like they are part of their school and to achieve higher academic results. Most importantly, involved families had a particularly strong influence on student attendance and the occurrence of wagging or skipping school.

The following graphs show how families influence student engagement with school and learning:

Graph 7: Selected engagement indicators for Year 3 to Year 6 students who say their family asks about school work often and participates in school activities or who say their family asks about school work sometimes and does not participate in school activities or student does not know



Graph 8: Selected engagement indicators for Year 7 to Year 12 students who say their family asks about school work often and comes to school events or who say their family asks about school work sometimes and does not come to school events



Views of parents

The majority of parents who participated in the survey aspired to be actively involved in their child's learning. However, parents also outlined challenges, such as competing demands impacting on available time and capacity, a lack of communication from schools or a school culture that they felt did not invite or value family involvement.

Suggestions from students

- Students valued time spent with family members and felt that this was sometimes hindered by too many or competing school commitments and time spent doing homework or assignments. Reducing school commitments, consideration of the timing of assessment pieces and involvement of families within learning activities were suggested as ways for schools and school staff to enable students to spend more time with family.

- Schools to provide practical support such as food, transport, school resources and learning support, particularly when it is not available or not consistently available within the home environment.
- Families to provide a home environment that supports learning. This included having positive relationships, structure, promoting wellbeing and an interest in the student and their education.
- Students suggested families can support positive relationships between home and school by influencing the attitude of the student/s, and by providing advice or advocating on behalf of student/s.

Links to School and Learning Consultation – Technical Report

- Chapter 3.3 – Families that are involved and interested
- Chapter 8 – Parents' views



Secondary Factors - The Accelerators



About learning

1. **A positive, fair and supportive classroom environment**
2. **Teaching and learning that is interesting and relevant**
3. **Choices and a say on decisions that affect us**

About the student

4. **Feeling safe**
5. **Help to overcome personal issues**
6. **Feeling physically and mentally well**

The accelerators are used to describe more specific influences on students' engagement that have emerged through the consultation. In the survey and the group discussions, students identified a range of accelerating factors that influenced their feelings towards school, their willingness to attend and their ability to engage in learning and achieve well academically.

The information gained from students in the consultation shows evidence of a complex interplay whereby foundations influence student engagement directly but also, and perhaps more critically, through a range of factors that accelerate the level of students' engagement with school and learning.

These accelerators have two sub-categories. Firstly, factors that relate to the learning environment and the way that learning content is developed and delivered and, secondly, factors that relate to the student and the management of their physical and emotional health so that a focus on learning is maximised.

The data provided by students through the survey strongly supports two findings:

1. Students who have strong relationships with peers, teachers and their family are much more likely to do well against the range of accelerating factors identified through the consultation.
2. Students who rate highly on any of the accelerating factors are much more likely to do well against the selected engagement indicators of liking school, sense of belonging at school, attendance and academic achievement.

It is important to consider that not all accelerators weigh equally for all students and that some factors can compensate for others. Additionally, the list of factors described in the following chapters is not exhaustive and further research is recommended to explore other possible factors and their relation to each other.

1. A positive, fair and supportive classroom environment

Throughout the consultation, students spoke strongly about the benefit of a positive, fair and supportive environment for learning.

Teachers played a significant role in establishing classroom culture and expectations, and students wanted to be supported to contribute to the environment.

... | *Be kind and friendly.*

... | *When everyone gets along and helps each other.*

The learning environment and learning

Students valued a calm and well-managed environment that enhanced behaviour, created a feeling of comfort and promoted learning. Relationships with students and teachers greatly influenced this environment, and students preferred quality environments in which everyone was positive and supportive and where there were no judgements.

... | *Being able to express thoughts and beliefs without being judged or oppressed.*

Feeling calm and ready to learn was critical, and students described a range of strategies that supported calmness for learning including positive relationships, breaks, being physically active, pets, familiar objects (such as toys), friends and nature.

... | *Letting other people work in peace.*

... | *Fun, happy environment whilst still doing work – (not feeling like you're in jail).*

Functional resources and a comfortable physical environment also contributed to a positive learning environment.

... | *I would change technology and make it have no problems.*

... | *Great facilities (learning area).*

Teacher practices in a supportive learning environment

Teachers created an optimal environment for engagement through being calm and enforcing clear and consistent rules and expectations. Fairness was a particularly important classroom practice, with students stressing the importance of all students being treated equally and that they disliked when teachers showed favouritism. Students appreciated the ways teachers worked to ensure all students were participating in learning and provided encouragement.

... | *They are fair and care for each kid equally.*

... | *They are calm. Relaxed. Understanding.*

... | *The way they get people involved.*

Students in Year 7 to Year 12 wanted their classroom to mirror an adult learning environment, where students and teachers were treated with mutual respect and where teachers were relaxed and flexible.

Learning environments that do not facilitate learning

Learning in an “unhappy learning environment” (Year 3 to 6 student) was difficult for students. Such environments were characterised by disorganisation, poor classroom management, noise, interruptions and distractions from other students, people yelling and students feeling afraid or intimidated.

In particular, some students referred to the behaviour of peers as impinging on their own right to learn and ability to engage in learning. Students looked to teachers to enforce classroom management and preferred positive behaviour management techniques.

... | *When people yell at you for getting an answer wrong.*

... *Sometimes I know it's hard to learn when the environment is loud, noisy and distracting.*

... *When the teachers can't control a rowdy class.*

Support for learning

Students described varying ways in which friends, other students and school staff supported learning. Critically, relationships with others and the social environment affected how students felt about school and learning, and influenced whether they felt comfortable seeking help for learning. Quality interpersonal relationships and supportive classroom environments promoted help-seeking behaviour.

... *My teacher helped us by sitting down and doing the work with us.*

... *Friends help us learn.*

Barriers to accessing support for learning

A range of situations affected student self-confidence and support-seeking behaviour.

Fear, embarrassment and uncertainty

... *Someone might be too shy to ask for help so they copy others work and they never learn anything or get the help they need because the teacher just thinks they are fine.*

Availability and accessibility of school staff

... *Kids need to have more in-depth help.*

... *The teachers focus on people messing about the whole lesson and the people who want to learn miss out!*

... *More helper teachers to stand at the back of the room and help us with individual stuff.*

Accessibility of support resources

... *Because they might need a tutor and it might cost a lot.*

... *Having mental disabilities at a school that has no help.*

... *Some students don't speak fluently.*

Survey data

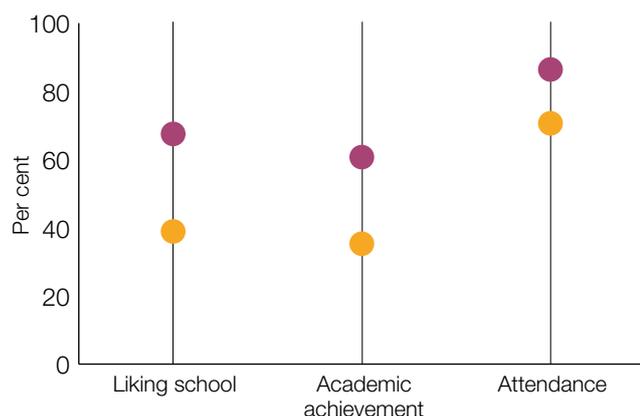
- **63 per cent** of students in Year 7 to Year 12 felt that teachers at their school treat students fairly most of the time.
- **41 per cent** of students in Year 7 to Year 12 reported having been treated unfairly by a teacher before.
- Less than **one-half** of all students said they usually get the help they need to do their school work.

Influence on engagement

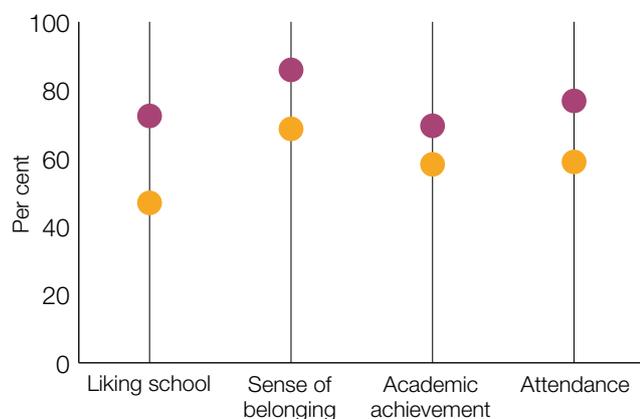
- Students who usually get along with their teachers are more likely to report that teachers treat students fairly most of the time, that they have never been treated unfairly and that they usually get the help they need to do their school work.
- Students who say that teachers treat students fairly most of the time and those who usually get the help they need are more likely to feel part of their school, to like school and say it is very important to them to be at school every day. They are also more likely to achieve higher academic results and this is particularly influenced by the availability of support for learning.

The following graphs show how student perceptions of fairness and the availability of support for learning influence student engagement with school and learning:

Graph 9: Selected engagement indicators for Year 3 to Year 6 students saying they get the help they need *always* or *sometimes*



Graph 10: Selected engagement indicators for Year 7 to Year 12 students saying they get the help they need *usually* or *sometimes*



Suggestions from students

- School staff and students work to develop positive classroom cultures in which people are friendly, welcoming and supportive and environments that are physically and emotionally safe. This included school staff consistently and fairly enforcing rules and for students to consider their own behaviour and its effect on others.
- Implementation of strategies within schools and classrooms that support calmness for learning, including breaks, pets/animals, meditation, working with friends and access to natural environments.
- Schools to have up-to-date and functional resources available and used purposefully for learning. Resources included library books, DVDs, 3D printers, laser cutters and sports equipment.
- Schools to create inviting and physically comfortable classrooms. Suggestions included changes to colour schemes, comfortable chairs, natural airflow and opportunities to work outside.
- Increased accessibility to support for learning within the classroom provided by schools. Students suggested various strategies such as increasing the number of school staff (more teachers or aides/assistants) to increase available staff in the classroom or to decrease the size of classes, and consideration of class composition (student need, ability/streaming, removal of disruptive students).

Links to School and Learning Consultation – Technical Report

- Chapter 4.1 – A positive and fair classroom environment
- Chapter 4.2 – A supportive classroom environment

2. Teaching and learning that is interesting and relevant

Students indicated that engaging learning experiences that cater to student learning requirements, needs and interests are critical for their engagement with learning.

Teaching and learning that is interesting

There was a clear indication that diversity in learning experiences increased engagement with learning. Preferred teaching and learning strategies were hands-on and practical, enabled interaction with fellow students, involved learning through games, strategies, excursions and incursions, included purposeful use of technology and enabled choice and autonomy. Learning in these ways “helps people learn while having fun” (Year 3 to 6 student), and made learning enjoyable, interesting, simplified and easier to remember.

... *Games that are educational are cool because it helps people learn while having fun.*

... *A variety of different ways to learn, instead of just writing notes from a board constantly.*

Clear explanations were consistently mentioned as reducing the level of stress and anxiety students experienced in the classroom. A lack of information or explanation made students feel stressed, isolated or frustrated, particularly if it appeared their fellow students understood the work or activity.

... *A teacher who explains the work well will help all the students understand and not worry about what they have to do.*

Students said being provided with opportunities to develop their competence through appropriately tailored learning experiences was important to them. Through their achievements, they are enabled to view themselves as successful learners and, through the encouragement and recognition of their efforts, can positively build their self-belief, self-confidence and motivation.

... *Constantly failing puts students off trying.*

Engagement with learning was hindered by learning experiences that were too easy, too difficult, repetitive, not interactive, not explained well or rushed.



Curriculum content that is relevant

Students' attention to particular curriculum content areas is dependent on a range of variable factors. Students' inherent interest in the content, the way it was taught and their capacity to achieve a level of competence were all significant in creating learning experiences that were interesting and "relatable" (Year 7 to 12 student).

Students enjoyed learning when content and learning experiences:

Aroused curiosity

... *When you learn something new – it's like a new world or a new door to open.*

Was interesting

... *[I enjoy] learning new things that are interesting and relatable.*

Was meaningful

... *[I enjoy] childcare – get a certificate to work with children. So I can have a future in a day care or midwifery.*

... *When I was doing chemistry and physics and I discovered that I want to study aeronautical and aerodynamic engineering.*

Encouraged creativity

... *I like doing art because I get to draw, paint, colour in and tell ideas.*

Enabled choice

... *Having more say in what we learn and what subjects we would like to do (more variety of what we can choose).*

Correspondingly, students reported they find it difficult to engage in content that was perceived as boring, uninteresting or irrelevant to their lives:

... *Up to a certain point in education, it eventually becomes unusable in everyday life. Example, where am I going to use quadratics in day-to-day life.*

When asked about positive learning experiences, students in Year 3 to Year 6 were most likely to describe such events as interesting and encouraging creativity while students in Year 7 to Year 12 were more likely to emphasise meaningfulness and the relevance of learning to their lives.

Some students in Year 7 to Year 12 expressed frustration towards the curriculum content offerings available to them, stressing the impact that curriculum offerings have on their future. Limited curriculum offerings and poor timetabling of curriculum content influenced student behaviour and attitude towards school.

... *Health studies runs at the same time as human biology BUT BOTH subjects are pre-reqs for any given health work field.*

Sport was consistently mentioned as an enjoyable curriculum area for a variety of reasons. Male and female students referred to being physically active as a welcome break from learning and important to be healthy, developing skills, working in groups or teams and being able to play their favourite sport.



The role of teachers and students

Students across all year levels strongly acknowledged the role teachers play in creating enjoyable and interesting learning experiences. Engaging learning experiences also contributed positively to student-teacher relationships.

... *Teachers that understand 'your' learning.*

... *Each teacher has a fun and special way of teaching their students. I think that each student likes a different teacher because of the way they teach.*

While students noted that teachers have a significant role to play in the provision of engaging and appropriately challenging learning experiences, some students acknowledged that they too have a role in their own learning. Students identified behaviours and strengths that were helpful and unhelpful for engagement with school and learning.

... *Entering class with a positive attitude.*

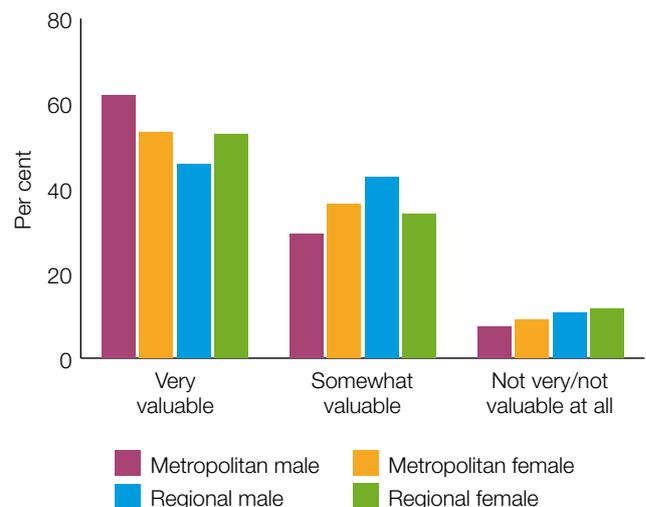
... *Listening to the teacher. Look at the teacher.*



Survey data

- **54 per cent** of students in Year 7 to Year 12 reported that what they are learning at school is 'very valuable' to them and their future while almost **10 per cent** answered 'not very valuable' or 'not valuable at all'.
- **Male students** in the metropolitan area (62%) were the cohort most likely to find their learning very valuable while male students in regional areas (46%) were least likely to say this. No regional difference was measured for female students.
- In Year 3 to Year 6, more than **two-thirds** of students (69%) said they like school because of sports – the second most popular answer after 'seeing my friends'.
- In Year 7 to Year 12, almost **two-thirds** of boys (63%) and more than **one-half** of girls (51%) mentioned sports as one of the things they most enjoy about school – the third most popular answer after 'hanging out with friends' and 'learning new things'.

Graph 11: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students saying what they are learning at school is very valuable, somewhat valuable or not very/not valuable at all, by gender and region



The top three reasons why students in Year 7 to Year 12 found what they were learning valuable included:

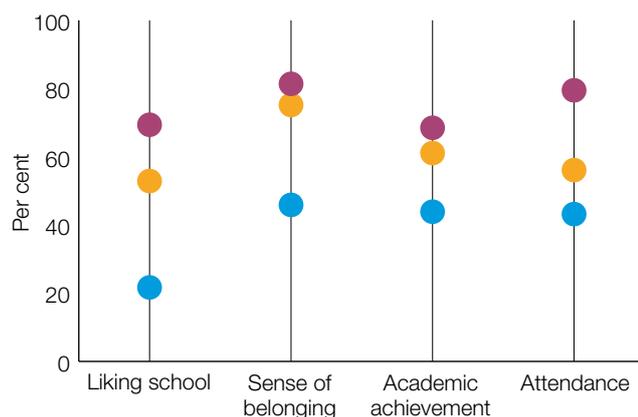
1. It will help me get a job (83.4%)
2. It will enable me to do more study / go to university (72.5%)
3. I enjoy learning (49.0%).

Influence on engagement

- Students who usually get along with other students and teachers, and students with families who are involved, are more likely to say that what they are learning at school is very valuable to them and their future.
- Students who say that what they are learning at school is very valuable to them and their future are more likely to feel part of their school, to like school, to say it is very important to them to be at school every day and to achieve higher academic results.

The following graph illustrates how this accelerator influences student engagement with school and learning:

Graph 12: Selected engagement indicators for Year 7 to Year 12 students saying they find what they are learning at school very valuable, somewhat valuable or not valuable



Suggestions by students:

- School staff to make learning more interesting through the use of teaching and learning strategies that are hands-on, interactive and, where applicable, include purposeful use of technology.
- Learning to be appropriately tailored and scaffolded for student ability by school staff to decrease stress and enable students to experience success with learning.
- Schools and school staff to ensure learning is purposeful and makes connections to students' present and future lives. For students this meant connections to family or community, health and wellbeing, life skills and future careers, and opportunities to explore a variety of post-school pathways and careers.
- Support for student understanding of work requirements, including clear explanations and reminders about assessment from school staff. For students in Year 7 to Year 12, regular targeted communication and support for work and graduation requirements were also suggested.
- School staff to collaborate and map assessment tasks across the year, taking into consideration the demands of assessment pieces, homework, general study and students' lives outside of school.
- Students to practise behaviours that support learning, such as approaching learning with a positive attitude, applying effort, listening in class, seeking assistance when required and to persist.

Links to School and Learning Consultation – Technical Report

- Chapter 4.3 – Teaching and learning that is interesting
- Chapter 4.4 – Teaching and learning that is relevant

3. Choices and a say on decisions that affect us

Having their voices heard mattered to students. Students said when they were provided with opportunities to have a say about school and learning it:

- develops their confidence
- increases their level of responsibility and ownership of their learning outcomes
- created an environment that reflects their lives and identities in which they feel valued and comfortable to learn.

... *[...] if we choose the books we would like to read, more students might want to read books.*

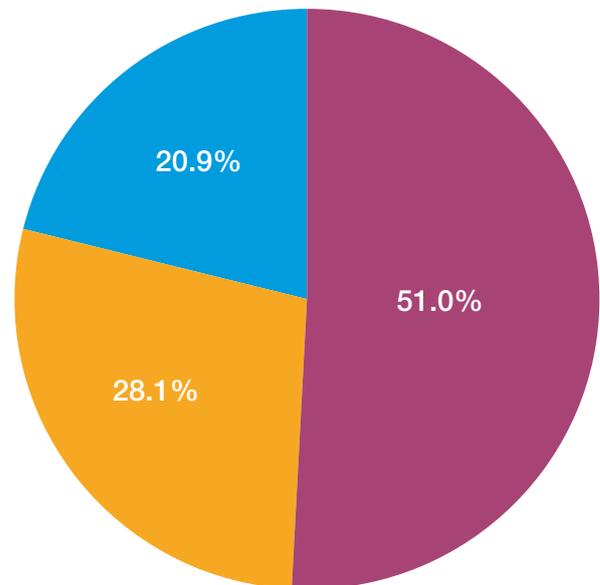
... *The way the students are involved in decision making process in relation to student experience.*

... *A free period on certain days to show the teachers and to let the school know what we want to learn.*

Survey data

- **One-half** of Year 7 to Year 12 students felt that they have a say in how things work at their school.
- **1 in 5** students in Year 7 to Year 12 felt they have no say in how things work at their school.

Graph 13: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students agreeing, disagreeing or neither with the statement 'Students in this school have a say in how things work'



Teachers were highly valued when they sought the views of students, listened to their opinions and responded to their suggestions. This was particularly true for students in Year 7 to Year 12 – their increasing desire for autonomy underscores the importance of having their views and ideas respected.

... *Make use of your ideas and thoughts.*

... *They treat us more like young adults and less like students.*

Participation supports learning

Students described a sense of empowerment when they were provided with opportunities to exercise choice in their learning.

Having a say in their learning decreased frustration and increased interest, ownership and engagement with learning. Participation also developed behaviours, dispositions and skills conducive to learning, such as self-efficacy, responsibility and self-directed learning.

... *In Year 2 we could make our own choices and it let us be a little bit more responsible.*

... *It helps when the teacher asks if this is the way that you like to work.*

... *We got to decide our own choices to learn better.*

... *When I got to choose the study method/ type of activities which I had to do in order to work as productively and efficiently as possible.*

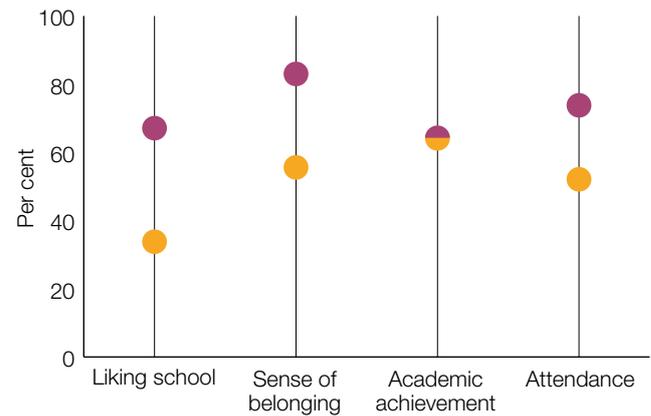
... *When I get to have a say in what I learn about.*

Influence on engagement

- Students who usually get along with their teachers, and students with families who are involved, are more likely to say that students at their school have a say in how things work.
- Students who agree they have a say in how things work at their school are more likely to feel part of their school, to like school, and to say it is very important to them to be at school every day. However the data from the survey showed no impact on academic achievement.

The following graph illustrates how this accelerator influences student engagement with school and learning:

Graph 14: Selected engagement indicators for Year 7 to Year 12 students **agreeing or **disagreeing** with the statement 'Students in this school have a say in how things work'**



Views of parents

Parents agreed with students and made clear connections between participation and student sense of belonging and engagement with learning. From the perspective of parents, participation develops in students a sense of ownership, citizenship, purposefulness and connection to the school and to learning.

... *I believe the students have a voice and are able to express their needs. I moved [my child] from another school because this was important to me.*

... *Talk with the students and ask them [what would] make coming to school fun and not a thing that they have to do.*

Suggestions by students

- Students wished to provide input into areas that influence the student experience, and their suggestions for change across the primary and secondary factors demonstrate the important insight students offer when provided the opportunity. With regard to having choices and having a say, students made wide-ranging suggestions to make school and learning more interesting and engaging. Their suggestions related to:
 - School culture – students, particularly in Year 7 to Year 12, wanted a school culture that valued and demonstrated respect for students through student participation.
 - Relationships with school staff – students in Year 7 to Year 12 suggested cooperative relationships to support students having more of a say in their learning, to be able to give feedback to school staff and to have input into employment processes.
 - Learning experiences – suggestions included different options within learning experiences to cater to ability or interest, to make learning more meaningful, and to discuss the focus of learning (what to learn within the curriculum; interests and needs of students). Students also had various views on homework; some wanting more, some wanting less and some emphasising that homework should be purposeful and easily understood.
 - Their sense of comfort and safety – students wanted to be provided with opportunities to share their perspective on how to make schools safer, have a space to de-stress when anxious, upset or angry and the autonomy to decide when they need to use this space, and also have various ways to discuss concerns with school staff.
- Uniforms – changes to school uniforms and uniform policies were a common suggestion, particularly for students in Year 7 to Year 12. Students raised concerns that uniforms were not functional, of poor quality, uncomfortable, too expensive and gendered. Students suggested they could design uniforms and that they wanted uniforms that were comfortable, practical, fit-for-purpose and affordable.
- Recognition by school staff of their developing independence by enabling and supporting student autonomy where possible, such as through learning experiences or (limited use of) seating plans.

Links to School and Learning Consultation – Technical Report

- Chapter 4.5 – Choices and a say on decisions that affect us
- Chapter 8 – Parents' views

good teachers

- Always nice
- always happy to listen
- They actually explain

4. Feeling safe

Feeling and being safe was essential for students to be ready and able to engage with learning. It affected students' willingness to attend school and their ability to fully benefit from their educational opportunities. When students felt unsafe it affected their behaviour and their feelings towards school and learning.

Through the group discussions many important messages about safety emerged:

Feeling safe is a precursor to learning

... *Because it was a safe place to learn about new things.*

Friends create safety

... *Friends help you feel accepted and also make the environment feel safer and more enjoyable/comfortable.*

... *[Without friends] you feel alone, unsafe, insecure.*

Teachers create safety

... *Teachers need to learn how to empathise with students and understand the unsafe community other students can create.*

... *Much less BULLYING because I'm getting bullied too much. Help me teachers.*

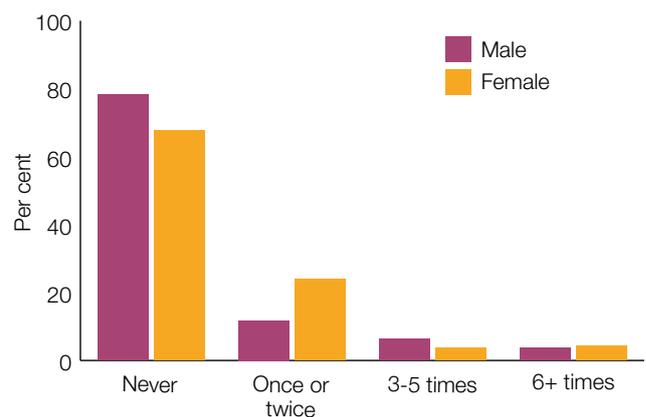
Safety at school is particularly important for children who may not experience safety in other aspects of their lives

... *Somewhere safe to live to know that people are out there to help them.*

Survey data

- **9 in 10** Year 3 to Year 6 students and **4 in 5** Year 7 to Year 12 students said they feel safe most or all of the time.
- But **1 in 10** Year 3 to Year 6 students and **1 in 5** Year 7 to Year 12 students said they feel unsafe sometimes or more. Compared to the size of WA's student population, that equates to around **50,000** Year 3 to Year 12 students who sometimes don't feel safe and are often afraid someone will hurt or bully them at school.
- **Male and female students** in all year levels were **equally affected** by feeling unsafe. However, female Year 7 to Year 12 students were more likely than male students to say that they had missed school sometime in the past because of fear of being hurt or bullied.

Graph 15: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students saying they have never, once or twice, 3-5 times, or 6 or more times not gone to school because they were afraid someone might hurt or bully them, by gender

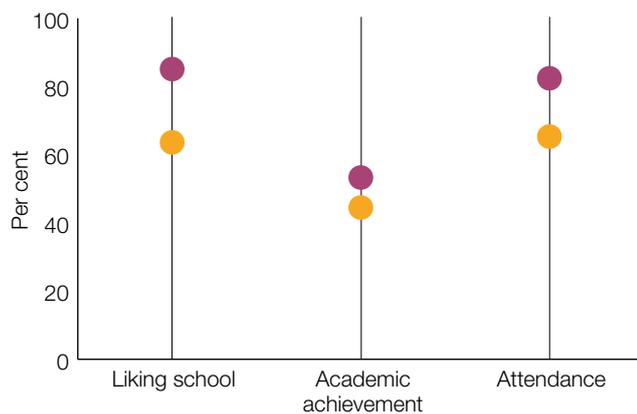


Influence on engagement

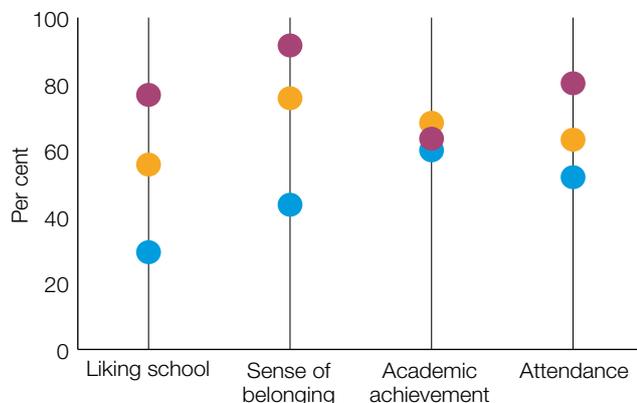
- Students who always or usually get along with their peers and teachers are more likely to feel safe and to have no fear of being hurt or bullied.
- Students who say they feel safe are more likely to feel part of their school, to like school and to say it is very important for them to be at school every day. However, feeling safe was not found to significantly influence academic achievement.

These two graphs show how feelings of safety influence student engagement with school and learning:

Graph 16: Selected engagement indicators for Year 3 to Year 6 students who feel safe all the time or not all the time



Graph 17: Selected engagement indicators for Year 7 to Year 12 students who feel safe all the time, most of the time or half the time or less



Suggestions from students

- Schools to nurture and promote a culture of safety based on positive relationships. This included proactive approaches such as positive behaviour programs to reduce bullying and fighting, increased education for students and school staff about gender identity and sexual orientations, and no labelling of students.
- Clear and consistently applied rules and consequences by school staff, particularly in response to bullying and fighting. Students felt instances of bullying or fighting were 'noted' and that this was an inadequate response.
- Schools to provide a welcoming and safe physical environment addressing areas of unsafe behaviours and activities from the perspective of students. Suggestions to make schools safer and more inviting included reducing congestion, increasing lighting and different building materials and colour choices.
- Schools to implement, promote and share with students different approaches to safety, including positive messaging around the school (such as through posters), increased natural surveillance (through more staff on duty, and cameras or walkie talkies for ease of communication), and discussion with students about the steps schools were taking to keep them safe.

Links to School and Learning Consultation – Technical Report

- ➔ Chapter 4.6 – Feeling safe
- ➔ Chapter 4.1 – A positive and fair classroom environment
- ➔ Chapter 4.2 – A supportive classroom environment

5. Help to overcome personal issues

To be better positioned to engage with learning, students identified the need for support:

- to develop and navigate positive relationships including responses to bullying
- with mental health and wellbeing
- to make and follow through on decisions
- with family concerns.

Kids [...] need help with things that may have happened at home or school. If people are upset it may be hard for them to learn.

Students identified a number of potential sources of support. Personal networks of friends and family members and formal supports of school staff and external agencies were all essential in creating a supportive environment.

Friends, teachers, family members, carers, teacher assistants, chaplains, school nurses, helplines and the community.

Support from friends, other students, school staff and family

Within the school environment, students spoke positively of a broad range of sources of support available to them. These individuals provided advice and encouragement and were characterised as helpful, reliable and trustworthy. This made the students feel supported and valued.

Importantly, the relationships students had with friends, other students and school staff greatly influenced whether they felt able to seek help, whether they valued the advice provided and their perceptions of trustworthiness of others.

Kids need to feel like they are being understood so they can feel they can trust.

Somewhere where kids can express their feelings.

I like it when we have buddy time because I help a person and help them open their hearts.

Family members were an important source of support for students providing practical, emotional and academic assistance that enabled students to feel confident, safe, ready and able to engage with school and learning.

Students without quality interpersonal relationships with friends, other students, school staff, family members or other community members were isolated from accessing the support such relationships provide.

Barriers to accessing help for personal issues

A range of situations affected support available to students, including their own self-confidence and support-seeking behaviour, the actions of others and service offerings:

Fear and embarrassment

Kids don't want their friends knowing because of peer pressure.

Accessibility and availability

It makes it hard because sometimes you have to pay a lot of money to get help.

Some schools don't have someone they can talk to.

Uncertainty

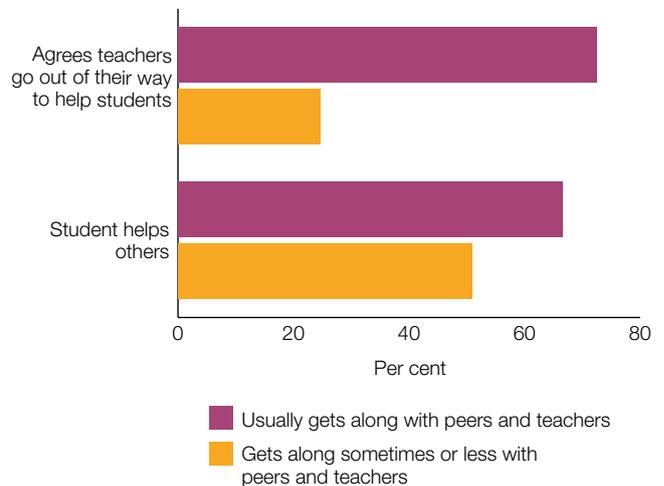
Not knowing where to get the help or fear of the unknown of what the help might be.

Referring to the home environment, some students described how family issues can make it difficult to engage with school and learning and receive the support they need. Home environments were seen as unhelpful when parents were “not helping you” (Year 3 to 6 student), “ignoring their kids” (Year 7 to 12 student) and “not supporting you” (Year 7 to 12 student).

Survey data

- **48 per cent** of Year 3 to Year 6 students and **39 per cent** of Year 7 to Year 12 students felt that people at school care a lot about them.
- Almost **two-thirds** of Year 7 to Year 12 students reported doing activities to help others at school.
- **61 per cent** of Year 7 to Year 12 students agreed that at their school teachers go out of their way to help students.
- **67 per cent** of Year 7 to Year 12 students agreed that at their school teachers will find time to talk to students if the students need to talk to someone.

Graph 18: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students agreeing teachers go out of their way to help students or saying they help others, by how well student gets along with peers and teachers

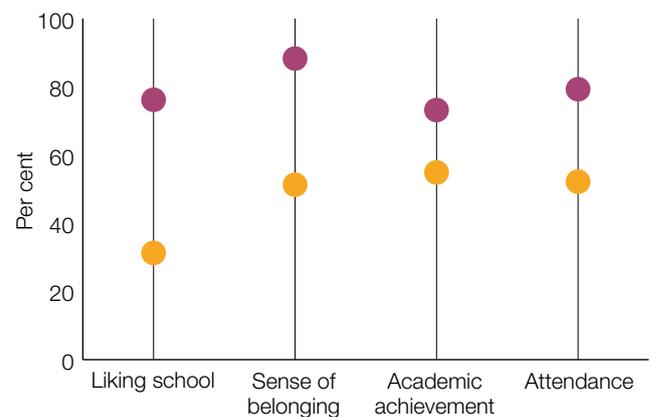


Influence on engagement

- Students who usually get along with other students and teachers are more likely to help others and also to agree that teachers go out of their way to help students. In addition, students with families who are involved and interested in school and learning were also found to be more likely to help others and see teachers as being helpful.
- Students who say that teachers go out of their way to help students and who do activities to help others are more likely to feel part of their school, to like school, to say it is very important to them to be at school every day and to achieve high academic results.

The following graphs show how the quality of the relationships students have at school influences their perceptions of teacher helpfulness and their own preparedness to help others. They also show how these factors affect student engagement with school and learning.

Graph 19: Selected engagement indicators for Year 7 to Year 12 students who say they help others and agree teachers go out of their way to help students or students who say they don't help others and disagree teachers go out of their way to help students





Suggestions from students

- Schools to promote avenues of support, providing a variety of options, so students are aware of the help available. This would contribute to a culture in which help-seeking behaviour is viewed positively and as a strength.
- Family members and school staff (teachers, assistants/aides, principals, non-teaching staff, counsellors, psychologists, etc.) to proactively build relationships and 'check in' with students, and be approachable and available for students to raise concerns. This means these adults regularly talk with students and ask about their health and wellbeing (particularly if there are changes in behaviour), encourage help-seeking behaviour, listen when students raise concerns, assure and uphold confidentiality, and provide support, advice or take direct action as requested and as required, with students being involved in or informing responses.
- Support systems to be accessible so they meet the varied needs of students and are responsive. Students referred to systems being stretched and complex or difficult to access (off-site locations, lacking privacy or prohibitive because of cost).

Links to School and Learning Consultation – Technical Report

- Chapter 4.7 – Help to overcome personal issues
- Chapter 3.3 – Families that are involved and interested

6. Feeling physically and mentally well

Physical and mental health affects all aspects of life and wellbeing. Students identified that being healthy increased their ability to engage with school and learning. Students adopted a holistic view of health, with being healthy including physical, mental and emotional health. To be healthy students needed to:

- have their basic needs met – food and sleep
- be provided with or have access to healthy foods
- be provided with breaks and opportunities to be physically active and/or mentally recharge
- have positive relationships with friends, other students, school staff and family members.

I would change the time of recess and lunch because not everyone is a fast eater so they can't play with their friends.

Teachers that not only care about your scores but your mental health [...].

More than 2 sport periods weekly because physical health is important.

Being unhealthy or student ill-health negatively affected student learning and students wanted support and strategies to minimise the consequences of ill-health.

Some students felt schools could do more to support their health and wellbeing, for instance through the provision of breakfast programs and altering school times to take account of their changing biology through adolescence.

We could grow a veggie garden for the school canteen.

Change the start and finish times to about 10:30 to 4:50 because teenagers are more focused at that time.

[Change] what time we start school (Year 7 to 12 in an education support centre).



Survey data

- **70 per cent** of Year 7 to Year 12 students rated their health as 'excellent' or 'very good'.
- **22 per cent** of Year 7 to Year 12 students reported having a long-term health problem.
- **41 per cent** of students in Year 7 to Year 12 reported difficulties with concentration, behaviour, feelings or getting along with people. Male students were more likely than female students to be affected by such difficulties.

Disability and long-term health problems

Students in mainstream schools identified that those students with disability or health problems, or who have family members with disabilities, can experience difficulties with their education and ability to access the help and support they need. Students suggested a range of supports that students with disability may require to like and engage with school and learning. These supports are the same as those for all students, including acknowledgement of learning needs and subsequent support for learning, having someone to talk/communicate with, someone to trust, safety and people to support them.

... *[What makes it hard to learn] Some kids might have learning disabilities or dyslexia.*

... *Having a broader learning spectrum... Taking into account people's learning skills and disabilities.*

Students attending education support centres described their health as 'good' or better, and more than three-quarters said their health was 'very good' or 'excellent'. This is significant as it highlights students with disability do not

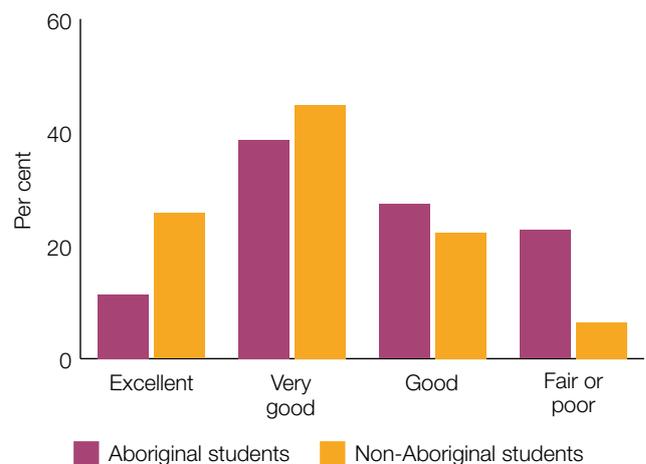
necessarily perceive their disability in terms of the impact it has or does not have on their health, or that their disability is linked with 'good' or 'poor' health outcomes.

Overall, students attending education support centres, and students with disability attending mainstream schools, presented positive attitudes and ideas about school and learning that were comparable and, at times more favourable, than those of students without disability attending mainstream schools. Most reported positive relationships with teachers and peers, felt that teachers cared about them and they received the help they needed for their school work. Most also felt it was important to be at school every day, as did their family members.

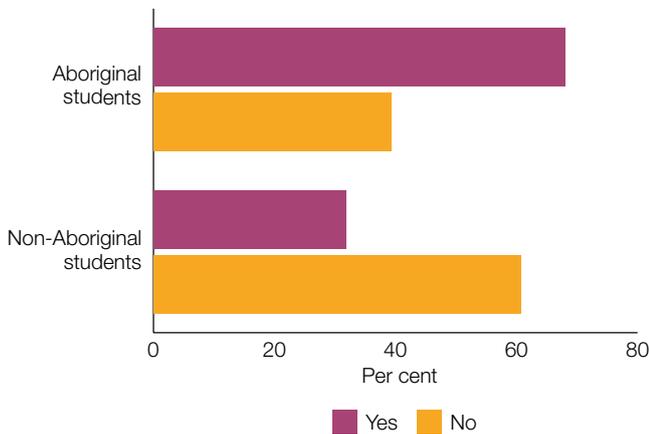
The health and wellbeing of Aboriginal students

The survey data showed that Aboriginal students have poorer health outcomes than their non-Aboriginal peers. They were more likely to give a poor assessment of their health, to report a long-term health problem or mental health difficulty and to say that they were doing extra work around the house because of the ill-health of other family members.

Graph 20: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students saying their health is excellent, very good, good, fair or poor, by Aboriginal status



Graph 21: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students who say they do or don't have difficulties in any of the following areas: concentration, behaviour, feelings or being able to get along with other people, by Aboriginal status

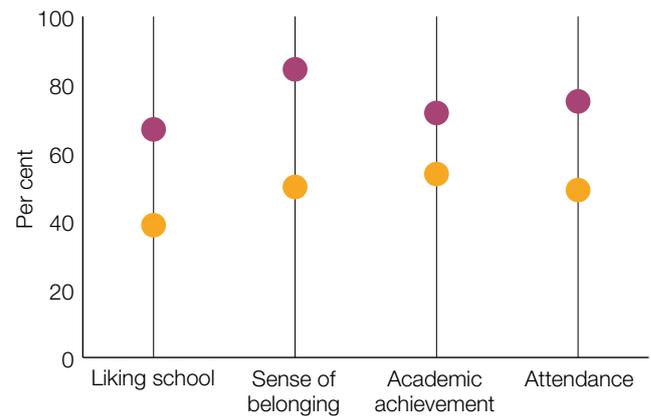


Influence on engagement

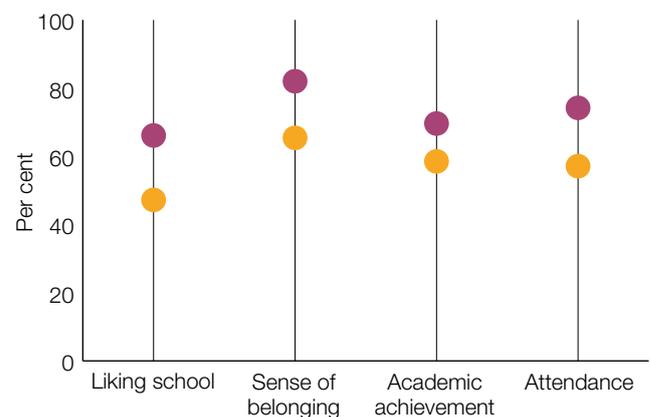
1. Students who usually get along with other students and teachers were less likely to report difficulties with their mental health. In addition, positive relationships at school were shown to be a protective factor for students with physical health problems.
2. Students with any type of ill-health were less likely than students with no health problems to feel like they are part of their school, to like school a lot, to achieve highly and to say it is very important to them to be at school every day.

The following two graphs illustrate the influence of long-term health conditions and mental health problems on engagement indicators:

Graph 22: Selected engagement indicators for Year 7 to Year 12 students saying their health is excellent or very good and they have no long-term health problems or students saying their health is good, fair or poor and they have long-term health problems



Graph 23: Selected engagement indicators for Year 7 to Year 12 students saying they do not or do have difficulty with concentration, behaviour or feelings



The survey data also suggests that student ill-health has a strong impact on a range of other accelerating factors, most notably feeling safe and the classroom environment. Students with a long-term health problem, disability or difficulties with mental health were less likely to say that:

- they usually get the help they need to do their school work
- they feel safe all the time or most of the time
- that teachers treat students fairly most of the time.

Feeling safe was a particularly important topic for students in education support centres.



Put some cameras in the school so we know who's bullying.

Suggestions by students

- Schools to create functional, clean and welcoming built environments that promote physical activity and social interaction. Specific suggestions included café-style or shaded tables and chairs within the school grounds so students could sit and talk together, more stairs to increase physical activity, different or better use of recreational sports areas to support student fitness and fit-for-purpose areas, particularly to account for weather. The toilets were also repeatedly mentioned as an area for improvement. Students suggested toilets should be cleaned more frequently.

- Healthier and more affordable canteen food and regular breakfast clubs to be provided through schools.
- Students in Year 7 to Year 12 suggested for schools to change the timing of the school day (later start and finish) to account for their changing biology.
- School staff to incorporate breaks from learning throughout the school day to increase concentration, motivation and engagement with learning. This included short breaks between lessons or classes, opportunities to move around or be active and longer lunch breaks.
- School staff and family members to acknowledge, understand and cater for the range of abilities of students, regardless of whether a diagnosis of disability has been made.

Links to School and Learning Consultation – Technical Report

- Chapter 4.8 – Feeling physically and mentally well
- Chapter 5 – Students in education support centres and students with disability
- Chapter 7 – Aboriginal students – comparative survey findings

Findings and recommendations



The following findings and recommendations provide the starting point for an ongoing approach to building a community that values education and works together to build a system that is respectful, inclusive, dynamic and responsive to the needs of children and young people to achieve positive education outcomes to the best of every child's ability.

The findings and recommendations encapsulate the nine factors children and young people identified as influencing their engagement. As such, the recommendations focus on strengthening supportive relationships and addressing circumstances that impede engagement, with action required across all levels of the education system.

Finding 1

The views of WA school students are an invaluable but underutilised resource that provides an opportunity to challenge our approaches and beliefs regarding education and continually improve our practice.

Their voice will be critical in understanding if we have made progress, and undertaking a regular dialogue with students will be important to developing an ongoing, collaborative relationship between schools and students.

The National School Opinion Survey (NSOS) collects information from students, staff and parents on a regular basis and is an important repository of information that could be used to guide individual schools and systems level policy and practice.

Recommendation 1

- a. The Minister for Education review the way NSOS data is used and reported on to monitor the implementation and effectiveness of policy and practice at a school level across WA.
- b. Governing authorities report on aggregated NSOS data relevant to the school sector in the annual reporting framework to monitor trends overtime.
- c. Schools demonstrate via their annual reports the actions they will take as a result of the NSOS survey of student responses.

Finding 2

Aboriginal students identified a number of areas that hinder engagement in their education and learning. The nature and quality of relationships with teachers and peers, the availability of support for learning and personal health problems, particularly difficulties with mental health, emerged as areas where many Aboriginal students experienced greater challenges than their non-Aboriginal peers.

Recommendation 2

Governing authorities review and evaluate the implementation of cultural frameworks for supporting Aboriginal students across schools in WA and report publically on the findings.



Finding 3

The foundations of student engagement are primarily based on the quality of relationships students have with teachers, school staff and other students.

The importance of having friends and positive relationships with other students was identified as a foundational element for engagement for any child or young person. Students looked to teachers to help them foster and maintain friendships with other students and build their resilience to bullying and adverse experiences.

Relationships with teachers emerged as the most significant foundational factor, even suggesting this to be a protective factor for students who had difficulties with family or peer relationships. Students acknowledged they had an important role to play in developing positive, respectful relationships with teachers, and also wanted teachers to treat students with respect.

Students called for teachers to be skilled not only in their subject matter but also in their ability to develop positive and constructive relationships with students and parents.

Recommendation 3

The governing authorities review the use of strategies and resources, such as the Australian Government's Student Wellbeing Hub, available to develop positive and respectful relationships across a school environment and report on the uptake, implementation and effectiveness across WA schools.

Recommendation 4

Schools be resourced to implement a whole-of-school approach to improve student-peer and student-teacher relationships and monitor and report annually on the strategies and outcomes of the approach. NSOS survey results or other such mechanisms be used to monitor and report on these relationships.

Recommendation 5

Governing authorities incorporate staff selection criteria addressing personal characteristics such as the value that teacher and student support candidates place on the development and maintenance of positive, respectful student-staff and parent-staff relationships into recruitment and selection processes.

Recommendation 6

Universities review current teacher training curriculums/course content in undergraduate and postgraduate degrees with regard to a clear expectation of teacher requirements to include strong interpersonal skills with a desire to build positive relationships with students and parents. This should be incorporated into practical development and assessment.



Finding 4

Children and young people involved in the consultation valued the role that parents or guardians and their broader families played in their learning. The ability of parents or guardians and broader families to understand the significance of a balanced approach to schooling, in particular homework, was significant to students.

Students recognised that those students who do not have supportive families needed extra assistance provided through the school to address their disadvantage.

Recommendation 7

Governing authorities and other parent program providers support schools in accessing information for parents and guardians on how to support their children in their learning, such as the Australian Government's Student Wellbeing Hub website.

Recommendation 8

Governing authorities monitor and report on the effectiveness of reporting procedures and communication processes with students and parents employed by schools to ensure maximum effectiveness. NSOS data or other such mechanisms be used to monitor this.

Finding 5

The role of teachers in providing a stimulating and positive learning environment was, unsurprisingly, critical to students' school and learning experiences.

Schools offering a wide range of learning activities and demonstrating the relevance of the curriculum to students' life outside of school, and their future aspirations were seen as positively influencing engagement, particularly in the high school years.

Importantly, practical, hands-on learning tasks and opportunities for physical activity were seen as highly positive by male and female students alike.

In addition, when teachers were fair to all, had clear expectations and provided a safe and consistent learning environment, students stated they were more motivated and positive towards learning.

More than half of the participating students reported 'at least some of the time' not getting the help that they need to complete their school work and this has a significant influence on their indicators of engagement.

Recommendation 9

Federal and State Ministers for Education review the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians with regard to ensuring the relevance of curriculum and other aspects of education meet the contemporary needs of students.

Recommendation 10

Governing authorities review the mechanisms for monitoring the provision of support to students who require assistance to complete their school work and develop strategies to ensure that such assistance is provided. NSOS data or other such mechanisms be used to monitor and report on this.

When you finally
understand something

Student -

-Teacher



Finding 6

Feeling safe at school was a key issue nominated by children and young people as something that schools should address as a matter of priority. Students who reported positive relationships with other students and with teachers were more likely to report feeling safe at school. Students with disability or long-term health conditions were more likely to report feeling unsafe at school and worried about issues such as bullying.

In addition to relationships, safety was impacted by the physical environment, school culture and approaches to responding to instances of bullying, such as consistency of response and modelling of respectful behaviours by teachers and school staff.

Recommendation 11

Governing authorities review and report on the resourcing, support and ongoing monitoring of the implementation of child safe policy and practice, and positive behaviour management across all schools in WA.

Recommendation 12

All schools implement the principles and practices of child safe organisations, underpinned by their own child safe policy. NSOS or other surveying of students be used to monitor students' reporting of safety at school on an ongoing basis.

Finding 7

Feeling supported to address personal problems and challenges, and feeling physically and mentally well was also important to students being able to attend, participate and achieve at school.

Physical and mental health has an impact across a range of engagement factors. There appears to be an under-diagnosis of physical and mental ill-health in schools, particularly for Aboriginal students, which warrants further investigation.

All students with a physical or mental health issue should have access to appropriate levels of support from schools to identify and manage the issue and reduce the impact of the issue on their engagement with school and learning.

Recommendation 13

Relevant governing authorities and key stakeholders work with the Commissioner for Children and Young People to review and develop a best practice model/s for implementation of social and personal support within schools.

Recommendation 14

The Department of Education commission a research project to investigate across all school sectors the apparent under-diagnosis of health conditions and its impact on students.



