

8.2 Parent perceptions of students' experiences of school and learning

Survey findings – closed survey responses

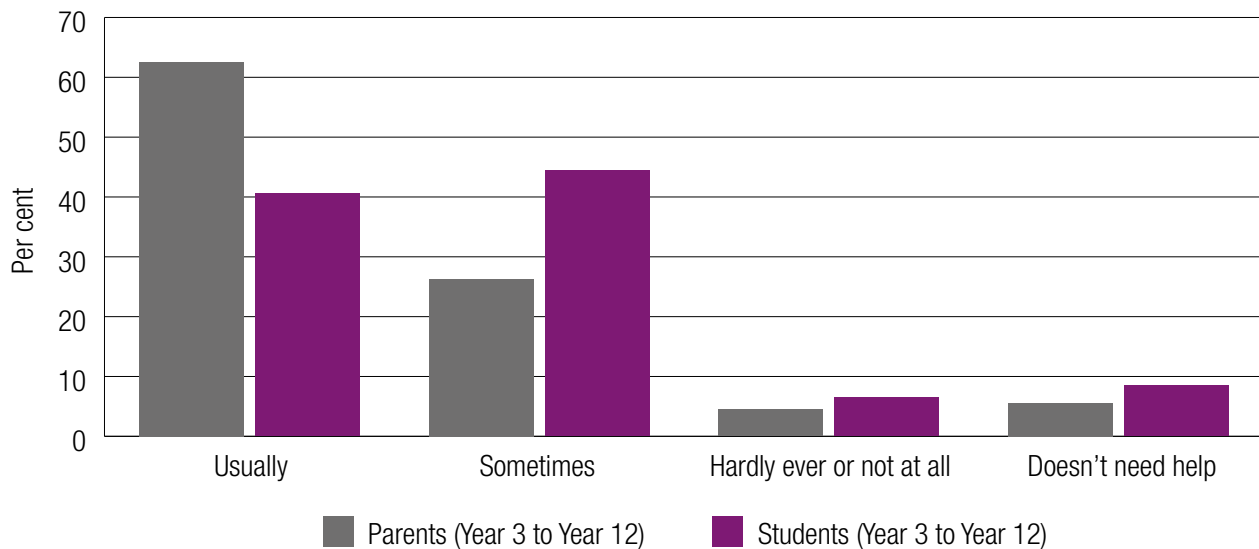
Parents reported that what their children most enjoy about school is seeing their friends (86%) and learning new things (79%). This was followed by sports (59%), arts/music (58%) and incursions/excursions (56%).

Most participating parents said their child likes school either 'a lot' (55%) or 'a bit' (22%). Nearly seven per cent of parents felt that their child 'doesn't like school' or doesn't like it 'at all'. The proportion of parents saying their child likes school 'a lot' is larger than the proportion of students saying the same (41% of Year 3 to Year 12 students said they like school 'a lot'), while the proportion of parents saying that their child does not like school is comparable to that of students (7% of Year 3 to Year 12 students said they 'don't like school' or 'not at all').

Eighty-three per cent of parents reported that their child feels part of the school community. This compares to 75 per cent of students saying the same. Twelve per cent of parents reported being unsure about whether their child feels part of the school community and six per cent said they didn't. This compares to 20 per cent of students being unsure about this and five per cent saying they didn't feel part.

In regard to support for learning, 63 per cent of parents felt their child 'usually' gets the help they need to learn. This compares to only 41 per cent of students reporting the same. Five per cent of parents felt their child 'hardly ever' or 'never' gets the help they need to learn. Almost seven per cent of students said the same.

Graph 8.1: Proportion of respondents saying student usually, sometimes, hardly ever/never gets the help they need or student doesn't need help, by parent response and student response



School-parent relationships – the perspective of parents

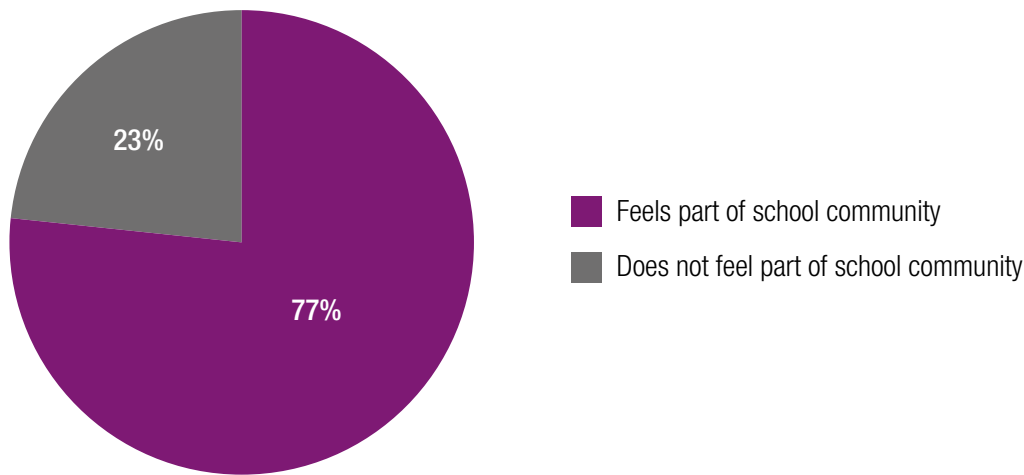
In terms of school-parent relationships, the majority of parents agreed that their child’s school is welcoming, takes parents’ concerns seriously, that there is good communication with parents and that the school encourages parents to be involved in their child’s learning activities. Parents also overwhelmingly found staff at their child’s school approachable and easy to talk to. Around three-quarters (76.8%) of parent respondents also said that they feel part of the school community.

There was however a sizeable proportion of parents who disagreed with some or all of the statements about their child’s school or who were undecided. Almost one-quarter (23.2%) said they did not feel part of the school community.

Table 8.1: Proportion of parents agreeing or disagreeing with selected statements about their child’s school

	Strongly agree or agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree or strongly disagree
Staff at this school take parents’ concerns seriously	74.6	14.8	10.6
This school has good communication with parents	73.2	13.4	13.4
Staff at this school are approachable and easy for parents to talk to	82.4	12.3	5.3
This school encourages parents to be involved in their child’s learning activities	71.8	15.9	12.3
This school is welcoming to parents and families	79.6	15.4	5.0

Graph 8.2: Proportion of parents saying they feel or don’t feel part of the school community



Survey findings – open narrative survey responses

“Make school fun and not a chore.”

The majority of parents who participated in the survey were satisfied with their child’s school. Most felt a sense of belonging to their child’s school, as did their child. Many reported that their child had positive experiences at school, which contributed to engagement in learning and to parental satisfaction with the school.

“I feel very fortunate that my child (and his older sister no longer at the school) have had the opportunity and experiences afforded to them by attending this school. I will be forever grateful.”

“As I am able to compare schools with my sister who has children of the same age at elite private schools in Melbourne, I am glad to say that academically my children are on par or above with their results and attend a small independent government country school. I am very happy with the quality of the teachers and the schooling being provided to my children.”

"When I first registered my child with this school, I was very apprehensive because of its reputation but both of my kids have blossomed and improved massively compared to their previous school."

In many ways, the views of parents were similar to those of students across Year 3 to Year 12, particularly with regard to factors that were significant for engagement with school and learning. Significant influences included:

- sense of belonging
- relationships with peers and teachers
- engaging learning experiences in a safe and supportive learning environment
- support for student wellbeing.

Parents acknowledged the substantial role of school staff in contributing to the factors above and highlighted that systems must support school staff in their role.

In terms of their own sense of connectedness to their child's school, parents emphasised the importance of effective communication, relationships with school staff and other parents and school leadership. For some parents, their own sense of connectedness influenced their child's perceptions and experiences, thus having implications for student engagement with school and learning.

Engagement indicators

"They feel like they are connected to the school which makes them more engaged in learning."

The open narrative responses of the parent survey were largely framed around hearing parent perceptions on ways to improve student enjoyment of school and learning, and student sense of belonging. Thus in terms of the engagement indicators, sense of belonging and liking school were largely discussed by parents.

What was indisputably clear from parents' responses was that a sense of belonging at school contributed positively to student motivation, behaviour, wellbeing and engagement. Belonging was experienced through positive relationships with other students and teachers – emphasising these important foundations for engagement.

"It [a sense of belonging] is important because it is hard to want to be somewhere if you do not feel like you belong."

"A sense of belonging is part of the motivation to go, and provides a sense of safety to be able to learn."

"She needs to be happy about going there. 12 years could seem like a lifetime if she wasn't fitting in."

"If they didn't think they belong, then they wouldn't want to be there and wouldn't want to learn. They would have a negative experience that would affect their future."

Some parents were concerned about emphasis on academic achievement. They wanted the education system to consider learning progress and to develop skills for learning (organisation, research, studying, time management, note-taking, etc). Knowledge beyond literacy and numeracy and consideration for student wellbeing were important factors for parents.

"A more connected and personal environment where he feels valued for who he is and what his capabilities are. Less emphasis on results and fitting within the box."

"Taking emphasis away from standardised testing and ranking students and monitoring each student on an individual basis to see if they are progressing in their own learning or do they need some more assistance. If they are improving then it shouldn't matter what the class average is."

"Learning skills more than specifics. HOW to learn is more important than WHAT she learns, at least initially."

"Academic performance is prized over creativity and original thought – children are not encouraged to think freely and creatively. My son is an average learner and as such there is little to incentivise excellence as his talent lies in creative pursuits which are not nurtured and go unrecognised."

Student sense of belonging

Largely parents felt their child experienced a sense of belonging within their school. Parents referred to the school culture and relationships with peers and school staff as contributing to a sense of belonging for their children. This section explores parent's views on the school culture, student participation and school programs. The influence of relationships with other students and school staff is explored in further detail in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Schools that created an environment in which students felt supported, valued and known were important for a sense of belonging. Parents suggested that when students felt happy, safe and confident at school, they developed a sense of ownership and pride in their school. Parents recognised that the actions of school staff and other students greatly influenced the school culture.

"My child's school has a fantastic community group and spirit. Teachers, parents and students all work together collaboratively including after school sport, music and community functions."

"Enjoys the learning environment, being part of something bigger than himself."

"The teachers and staff know him (they appear to know all children that attend the school). It is a relaxing and child-focused school."

"They have a group of peers, which assists that sense of belonging. Although despite being great young people who contribute to their community in many varied ways, they consistently get told they are the worst group of students ever – just because of a few students making different choices. This does not contribute to their sense of belonging, and they have become resentful of the school because of this."

Practices to support student sense of belonging

Participation of students

Parents suggested a sense of belonging was facilitated when students were positioned as valued individuals and provided with ways to meaningfully contribute to the school. Parents felt acknowledgement of the individual strengths of students was also an important practice that promoted belonging.

"The way this school involves the children is fantastic, getting them to participate as much as possible with different responsibilities and the older children interacting with the younger children (buddy system) is another positive."

"I think he feels valued as a class member thanks to his teacher who encourages that."

"My child attends a small community-run school where much emphasis is placed on belonging and ownership within the school and classroom. The school explicitly encourages participation, independence and responsibility, and respect for the child."

"At their school, they are respected as an individual and celebrated for their strengths rather than making them feel like they need to be at the same level as everyone else."

Similar to students, parents intimated that choice and having a say on decisions that affect them increases belonging and engagement. Suggestions for schools to implement strategies for participation included seeking the opinions and ideas of students, involving students in decision making and supporting students to organise events or programs. Such strategies, parents suggested, would develop in students a sense of ownership, citizenship, purposefulness and connection to the school.

"Seek their ideas and feedback on school initiatives/programs."

"If schools support their creativity and support to make things come from students, they will find some areas that can be owned by students."

"Ask the children how they feel and whether they like school."

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

"The school could include the students in some decision-making or planning for a school event. Also ask the students for ideas to make the school better. Teach the children from early age to care for each other. So everyone will be feeling as a part of the school."

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

"Encourage them to do something FOR the school or others at the school."

Inclusivity

"We are new to this school and it works differently from regular schools but already he feels accepted. I think generally though schools need to work harder on being inclusive, not just saying the words but demonstrating this daily by the actions and attitudes of teachers and their expectations of the way students behave."

Inclusivity within schools creates an environment in which all students, staff and parents feel welcomed and valued. An inclusive school environment promotes student development and engagement with education, rather than school avoidance and the negative effects of exclusion. Some schools had clearly developed a culture of inclusion.

"[My child's school] is a superb school. The culture of inclusion is palpable in the students."

However, parents indicated a more inclusive environment, with respect for diversity, would make their child feel a greater sense of belonging at school. For parents, this process needed to incorporate education and discussion with students about difference and treating others with respect. In some cases education was also required for school staff so as to better support individual students and inclusive practices.

"Educating students about other students who have special needs and what they can do to make them feel they are valued."

"Build a culture of acceptable behaviour in and outside the classroom. Teaching that you don't have to be best friends but you do have to listen with an open mind and respect others."

"No racism."

"The school should also work on teaching kids how to interact with their peers. Including everyone in their games. Not making [others] feel excluded or different. [...] Kids should be able to do what they like and not feel like what they do is wrong. Schools should teach kids about tolerance and acceptance."

Opportunities through school programs

Sense of belonging and relationships were also facilitated by participation in school programs. Activities included peer mentoring, music, sports, science and academic extension programs, school councils and extracurricular activities. Parents noted that involvement in these programs increased the number of peers students socialised with, thereby increasing their friendship group and support network, supported learning and made students feel valued – all of which contributed to a sense of connection to the school.

"At the moment she has been working on a music production, where she doesn't realise the positive impact the reading and singing is making on her literacy skills."

"My child's school has a great sense of community and seems to be very inclusive. Being a part of extra activities such as school choir seems to also enhance that sense of belonging."

"He is involved in a number of the school programs and feels he can contribute to help others."

"Being involved in two schools-within-schools i.e. the Gate Music Program and the Academic Extension Program has provided social and pastoral safety nets within a very large organisation. They have also afforded the opportunity for her to be surrounded by like-minded and similarly able students, as well as the opportunity to engage socially and academically across a range of year levels. All of these factors have led to an excellent assimilation into the school environment."

Several parents expressed concerns regarding the selection processes for involvement in some programs. Parents suggested that some students were not provided the opportunity to participate or felt the process was based on popularity rather than equality of opportunity. Effective structures, processes and relationships should be in place to enable all students to participate and to demonstrate they are valued members of the school community.

Relationships at school

"My child feels this way [a sense of belonging] because she thinks her school is safe and her friends and teachers are always caring and nice."

"Currently, as my son feels, there is really not much else positive about school, except for the care shown by the staff and other students."

Strong relationships developed resilience, motivation and self-confidence, and provided students with a variety of sources of support and belonging. The responses from parents underscored the importance of quality interpersonal relationships with peers and school staff, highlighting the range of ways relationships positively influence engagement with school and learning.

The comments from parents who stated that their child did not feel like they belong at the school referred to relationships, largely with other students, as influential. A few comments referred to the actions and behaviours of parents as influencing opportunities for friendships, the school culture or the attitude of their child.

"He is often excluded because he is not like many of the boys in the year who are alpha males. I find the parents pushy and don't socialise with them which has unfortunately excluded him from some peer groups/sport groups etc."

"I feel that she may not feel "connected" with her peers because as a community not a school community, parents aren't respecting one another enough, therefore placing this disrespect ultimately on the children."

"They feel that the school is more focused on sport rather than academic studies."

"Because he struggles to fit in with the socially accepted norm. The school system mostly expects all kids to fit in the same box and when they don't they can feel criticised or punished."

"He doesn't want to participate in anything."

Relationships with friends and other students

The relationships students had with peers influenced student dispositions towards school and learning and the perceptions of themselves. Quality interpersonal relationships with peers were identified by parents as essential for belonging, self-esteem, sense of safety and comfort, enjoyment of school and engagement with learning. In a difference to the comments from students, parents did not comment on the importance of friendships for learning, whereas students across Year 3 to Year 12 spoke extensively and strongly on this aspect of friendships. Many parents also referred to stability in schooling as contributing positively to relationship development across the school.

Parents felt improved relationships with peers would increase their child's sense of enjoyment and belonging at school. Being excluded, bullying, the volatility of friendships and the complexity of developing and navigating friendships detracted from a sense of inclusion. Similar to students, preventative approaches and proactive responses to bullying were important to parents.

Why do you think your child feels like they belong at their school?	What do you think would help your child like school more?
<p><i>"Because they enjoy the social interaction they get at school with people of their own age."</i></p> <p><i>"Last year she asked to move schools, as she was having issues with friends, but once we resolved that she has stopped saying that she hates school and wants to move."</i></p> <p><i>"They have friends and feel valued."</i></p> <p><i>"She has many friends. She feels safe and respected."</i></p> <p><i>"Because of his friends. If not for his friendships, I would try and move schools as his primary school is terrible."</i></p> <p><i>"I am not sure anything would [make my child enjoy school more] she is a typical teenager who enjoys school for the social aspects more than the learning."</i></p>	<p><i>"A wider friendship group, very small school not a lot of like-minded friends."</i></p> <p><i>"Peers in her class being friendlier."</i></p> <p><i>"If the school has more control over bullying and zero tolerance/anti-bullying strategies put in place, my child would be a happier kid."</i></p> <p><i>"Knowing she can go to school without being bullied and the ability to make genuine friendships."</i></p> <p><i>"He really struggles with the social aspect and doesn't feel he has meaningful relationships with his peers. Has anxiety about the demands placed on him by so many teachers, subjects and assessments."</i></p> <p><i>"New to the school and proving hard to break into existing friendships within the small cohort."</i></p> <p><i>"Her autism and anxiety prevents her from making supportive friendship groups; Her anxiety/depression makes it difficult for her to focus and learn; the majority of students appear to not be interested in their education."</i></p>

Practices to support relationships with friends and other students

Many parents suggested it would be beneficial for schools to provide support for students to develop and navigate friendships, and employ teaching practices that encourage interaction and socialisation. This suggestion is similar to that of students across Year 3 to Year 12, who requested support for friendships – as discussed in Chapter 4.7 – Help to overcome personal issues. Several parents acknowledged the positive work by school staff to foster relationships between students through learning opportunities and various school programs.

"Her main difficulty has been with other children making her upset or not wanting to play with her. It would be beneficial if the curriculum included more social topics, like conflict resolution, inclusion, etc."

"Doesn't enjoy school because of the social side. Not really the school's issue, he needs to work more at making and being a friend."

"More attention to social skills in Year 5 and 6 e.g. the Girl Power program, others and at times my child also really struggles with the dynamics and teachers do not guide or coach actively or successfully."

"Because the teachers are very supportive and made her feel comfortable and helped her to make friends when starting at her school."

"Strong school values, teachers provide interactive learning amongst children who don't always play together. Strong sports culture."

Relationships with teachers and other school staff

“On the whole, my child is fortunate to attend this school. I do think that the child’s relationship with the teacher is the most important foundation of learning. Children thrive when they feel their teacher likes them and is passionate about teaching them.”

Relationships with school staff, and in particular teachers, were noted by parents as affecting student experiences of school and learning. Parents referred to school staff as influencing student sense of belonging, their enjoyment of learning and whether students felt they were valued members of the school community. Parents spoke of the qualities which they liked or would like in the school staff working with their child. Teachers who were friendly, caring, respectful, encouraging and who knew students made students feel comfortable within school. Many parents referred to the stability of school staff as a positive factor in relationship development, which was also mentioned by some students in the consultation.

“Our school has a strong sense of community, the teachers are exceptionally caring, and know who each student is, whether they have taught them or not.”

“As a small school he knows everyone. Also has great male teachers who have stood in as role models – personal connection.”

“When he felt he belonged up until this year, he loved going to school, learning and striving for his best. This year with a sub-standard teacher, he often feels he doesn’t belong and doesn’t care about school or giving his best.”

“Because she feels as though the teachers pick on her for not having better grades; because her so-called friends are nice one day and bully her the next – bullying happens more often than not.”

“If the school and teachers have a positive approach towards learning and to the students. Students become more confident and feel they are safe where they belong.”

Teacher characteristics and practices contributing to student sense of belonging and enjoyment of school and learning

“He is very fortunate to have a teacher this year who focuses on children being in charge of their own learning and allowing them freedom to pursue their interests. He is also an emotionally supportive and kind teacher. Unfortunately, this seems to be rare though in our experience.”

Parents recognised and emphasised the critical role of teachers for engagement in learning. They spoke positively of many teachers or expressed the qualities they desired to see in teachers. Similar to students, parents wanted teachers who were passionate, enthusiastic, who knew their curriculum content area, who were caring and helpful, who used positive behaviour management, enabled students to have positive learning experiences and developed a sense of agency in students.

“Really good quality teachers who are really passionate about their subject and who are really able to convey that passion and enthusiasm to their students.”

“My child’s teacher is very experienced, organised, creates engaging lesson plans, has a warm personality and goes to a lot of effort to make the learning experience enjoyable.”

“Something wonderful happened this year. My child got 70% for an assessment and the teacher said, “Well done, you got 70%. You did this, this and this right”. She did not mention what [he] did not know. She gave not one word of misery to taint his happy memory. He is now highly motivated to work hard in that teacher’s class. He feels valued. He feels capable. He knows what he has to do and he will do it for that teacher and for the joy of doing well and being rewarded for it. – Please more positive teachers like this.”

“I genuinely believe we need better teachers, particularly in senior schools. We need teachers who genuinely like adolescents and who understand their unique needs at this time in their lives. I think if we had these sorts of teachers, kids generally would feel happier at school and more accepted and valued.”

Consideration of student’s personal circumstances and wellbeing was noted by parents as a factor that would enhance engagement. Parents wanted school staff to listen, understand individual needs and consider the impact on learning, self-esteem and relationships.

"Teachers to listen more and have empathy and understanding, educated in anxiety and other mental health conditions."

"Teachers that look after children's self-esteem."

"Having a more understanding teacher who is sympathetic and helpful in regard to her emotional needs."

"More pastoral care from his teacher."

Parents expressed compassion towards teachers, stating that they felt there was significant pressure on teachers exerted by a range of influences. Parents recognised that to be enabled to undertake their core work, teachers must be supported by the administration and the education system more broadly. Through their comments, parents referred to the wellbeing of teachers and teacher professional knowledge, noting the impact these have on students.

"Treat children with respect. Do not disregard/dismiss their concerns. Work through their worries understanding the big picture. For teachers to do this they need support from admin and other staff. Not cutting staff would also help. Lots of pressure on staff to do, be and understand all. Disability training – at both student and teacher level."

"[...] But primarily to have a teacher (and other school staff) who has fantastic emotional wellbeing themselves and can hence provide a safe and positive environment. The teacher's knowledge themselves pales into insignificance compared to how warmly they can relate to children and their own emotional regulation."

"Prioritising the emotional health of teachers and providing teachers who have emotional regulation issues with appropriate psychological support."

"Also teachers are not trained enough in classroom behaviour management, how to help unusual kids, how to keep the bullies in a better place, and also they need support themselves. It's a tough job."

"The school is great, but the teachers are over-worked and over-stressed. I think it's the same for teachers all over the country. Over-stressed and under-paid."

Learning and the classroom environment

"They like learning if there is relevance to the learning. If it can be applied to real situations. They like learning when there is a good relationship with the teacher, when the teacher treats them with respect and trusts them to problem solve the challenges. A bit of humour goes a long way too! They like learning when they can move and get into nature. They LOVE learning when they are not in front of a laptop or screen all the time."

The majority of the parents felt their child was engaged with learning because of the enjoyment they experienced. Many stated their child had an innate enjoyment or curiosity, with some highlighting that this had been instilled from a young age through the home environment. Other parents specified their child was excited by learning new things and enjoyed sharing their knowledge (particularly with siblings), the challenge of solving problems and experiencing success or saw value in education.

"Natural love of learning and curiosity. As a family we value this and they do too. Some teachers have contributed to this but more so it evolved from the home and family."

"My child is excited when she learns a new topic with ease or when she overcomes a difficult area of learning to now understand it clearly. I think she sees the value in learning new things."

"He enjoys using his knowledge and skills in the world around him. He also likes us to be proud of him, so he will often recite what he has learnt."

"They feel great success when they learn a new skill and subject."

Practices to support engagement with learning

Parents provided a variety of suggestions as to what would increase their child's enjoyment of, and subsequently engagement with, school and learning. Responses largely related to learning and mirrored those of students across Year 3 to Year 12. That is, learning that was hands-on, collaborative, relevant, appropriately challenging, enabled choice, incorporated breaks, and to receive assistance with learning as required.

"Teacher influence. Making it fun and exciting to learn."

"More space/freedom for their thinking and creativity, hands-on with less rigid restriction, flexibility of teacher in dealing with different kids (e.g. different personality, intelligence...). A teacher that works with heart matters all."

"Varied curriculum, less pressure to learn to NAPLAN/standardised testing. More varied teaching styles that suit childhood and adolescent development."

Pedagogy

Parents commented that their child's perceptions of school and learning were greatly influenced by their experiences within the classroom. For some, this meant that boredom stemmed from learning experiences that were not stimulating or not appropriately challenging for the child's academic level. For others, learning experiences that were too challenging or rushed negatively affected their child's self-esteem and feelings towards school. High expectations from teachers were important, however learning experiences needed to be scaffolded for students to experience success. Several parents expressed unease regarding the use of technology in classrooms, referring to the amount of screen-time and postural concerns, while others noted technology increased interest in learning. Parents stressed the importance of active pedagogies, learning outdoors and breaks from learning.

"My son gets very bored at school, he would like it more if he was given harder or more challenging work."

"As my son struggles with his classwork, it makes him feel like a 'dumb' kid, and so this affects his self-esteem. He hates to go to school, as this is where his weakness is exposed."

"My daughter needs clear explanations, positive reinforcement and enough time to complete tasks – if rushed or when she feels pressured she becomes very stressed."

"Alternative style of learning, more outdoor opportunities, nature based play, more male staff available at school, better rewards system for good behaviour, more sport, more patient teaching staff, more singing and art."

"Now that we have sought help he is now enjoying school. When he couldn't concentrate and complete his classroom work he felt like he was stupid and didn't like school. Being kept in during recess and lunch didn't help him as he then missed out on crucial socialisation skills needed to interact with his peers."

"Encouragement to expand thinking, not just give the 'right' answer."

Support for learning

Individualised or tailored support for learning was noted by parents as a way to increase enjoyment of school and learning and was noted by many as the type of support needed by their child. Some parents referred to specific curriculum content areas as the focus of support. Others referred to particular strategies, including one-on-one assistance, modification to student's specific learning requirements, smaller classes or small group work, proactive 'checking in', prompt feedback and clear explanations. Several parents felt the need to consistently advocate for learning support for their child.

"Presentation of material in a range of ways so that she can understand it."

"He needs to be reminded if he is struggling or does not understand something to ask for help."

"A lot of her teachers don't explain things differently. Only read from what is in the book and not try and explain it differently. As each kid learns things differently. There is no point repeating exactly what the teacher has said, if the student doesn't understand what they are saying."

"Since it is distance learning sometimes it would help to be able to get clarification directly and promptly from the teachers."

"If they don't understand the activity or if they particularly get something wrong. It doesn't seem to get explained, especially the wrong bit. The need to go over work a bit more individually."

Several parents with children who had a long-term disability or long-term health condition spoke positively of the support received, particularly in education support centres. However, some expressed frustration that support was not always readily available in all settings or commented on the knowledge of school staff, suggesting further professional development was required. Where support was not available, parents outlined the personal financial cost and time required to ensure their child received adequate support at school. Some indicated that learning strategies to support their child would also benefit the broader class, minimise the perception of difference and support inclusion.

"Teachers who understand special needs and how to convey/teach autistic children and support them on their learning journey. Better teaching styles and more hands-on."

"EA assistance, basic 'key word signing', assessments done by written work or iPad recording. Picture cards for basic situations e.g. need help, need toilet, finished."

"[...] The strategies beneficial for dyslexic kids are also of benefit to the balance of the class, therefore meaning no one needs to be singled out for a different approach. No funding is available for dyslexia, which places enormous pressure on the teachers and school. Not to mention the need to obtain support for our child in the private market at substantial expense. The support my son needs relies heavily on home programs. This affects my ability to work the hours that I'd like [...]."

"From p/p to Year 3 he was at [an education support centre], which was a wonderful experience for him and us. They were trained to deal with kids like him, had a lot more small group work, one-on-one learning, plus lots of positive programs that were implemented right from Kindy throughout the whole school, including mainstream and made it consistent, predictable and positive for all students. Teacher skills, understanding, compassion and communication skills made it a positive and safe learning experience for him and ideally he would have loved to stay and would have benefited so much more instead of having to transit to a mainstream school. Not such a great experience back at mainstream. Lack of all things listed above has made the rest of his primary school years a hard slug and not very positive for either him or parents [...]."

"It has taken us a long time to get appropriate support for our son. Once this happened this has made a huge difference to his learning, self-esteem and how he views school. This was due to a misdiagnosis and not fitting the funding criteria. I realise this is down to budgeting constraints however if a child is not performing at the required level for their age and year level then they need support."

Parents commented on the resourcing of schools more broadly, with many demanding more appropriate support for student learning. Suggestions included smaller class sizes, single-year classes, an increase in assistants/aides, adequate technology (particularly for students studying remotely) and specialised programs. Rural schools were noted by some parents in particular as requiring more funding to ensure students received equality of service.

"The system is failing the kids who fall behind, as they go up in grades the gaps get wider as the support dwindles off. The schools need more funding for specialised programs and ed assistance for the kids with learning difficulties that don't qualify for aid time."

"I think this school tries hard but it cannot help every student's individuality, and cannot be expected to, under-resourced and all that."

Learning environment

A learning environment that was characterised by support, encouragement and positive behaviour management was suggested by parents as facilitating engagement with learning. Similar to the comments from students, parents noted it was sometimes difficult for students to receive the help they required for learning if the teacher was responding to other students' behaviour or requests for assistance.

"He likes learning but his current environment makes it difficult for him to feel engaged and valued."

"He loves math but is quiet in class so he gets overlooked. The teacher seems to engage with the louder more boisterous children and spends a lot of time keeping the badly behaved ones in check."

"Not having witnessed her brother with autism receiving punitive consequences for his behaviour relating to his disability."

"By getting the help she needs with schoolwork without being ridiculed for not being a fast learner with low grades."

"A different teacher. She has had a hard time this year as her teacher does not seem to appreciate or is able to cope with the differing abilities of all the children in the class. My daughter is bored and no longer finds school stimulating or challenging."

Support for student wellbeing

"School should be a safe environment for children and a place that is 'theirs' to be in."

From the perspective of parents feeling accepted influenced student wellbeing, attitude to school and learning and ability to engage with learning. A sense of belonging created an environment in which students felt safe, happy, comfortable, respected and valued for who they are.

Parents outlined that for students with mental health concerns, experiences of trauma or who perceived themselves as 'different', feeling a sense of belonging was particularly important for feeling that school was a safe and enjoyable place to be.

"They need to belong, be a part to feel comfortable/relaxed, ready and willing to learn."

"She likes to feel as if she is part of something – that she matters to those around her – she has experienced trauma in her life so she needs a caring and consistent school world – it helps with her anxiety."

"Feeling like you belong promotes a happy healthy state of mind. Mental health and wellbeing is just as important as physical. It is easy to forget how you feel impacts your ability to function in daily life. Stress, depression or feelings of loneliness can be very isolating and difficult to explain."

Throughout the survey, parents made a clear connection between experiencing a sense of belonging through relationships and the impact on feeling ready and able to learn. Safety and belonging increased self-confidence, attitude and motivation, and parents perceived students were better able to engage in learning. Such responses are similar to those from students across Year 3 to Year 12, which indicated feeling safe and accepted was an important precursor to learning.

Parents described a lack of belonging as a distraction from learning, explaining that feeling excluded negatively impacted on students' wellbeing. Parents held the same view as students in that worrying about 'fitting in', safety, or the emotions associated with feeling excluded – feeling sad, lonely, confused, worthless – affected student ability to concentrate on learning, their interest in school and learning, and help-seeking behaviour.

<p><i>"If they are socially happy they are more receptive to learning. Unhappy kids are distracted from learning and their low self-esteem can impact learning confidence."</i></p> <p><i>"A safe learning environment makes her feel more relaxed, so that she is able to feel comfortable asking questions if she is unsure, it also means that she develops a sense of herself as someone who values education, because the school values education."</i></p> <p><i>"If he's comfortable and accepted at school he will be calmer and more switched on to learn."</i></p> <p><i>"Belonging relaxes you, makes you feel safe, [...] ready to learn."</i></p> <p><i>"Feeling part of a school community empowers children to communicate with other students and teachers and try new activities no matter their ability."</i></p>	<p><i>"Feeling excluded has reduced my son's enjoyment of school and love of learning."</i></p> <p><i>"Well in a previous school that our child attended, he did not feel like he fitted in. He was quite unhappy and this impacted on his emotional wellbeing, self-esteem and generally resulted in him underachieving for his potential."</i></p> <p><i>"If they have to worry about fitting in or who they are going to avoid at recess/lunch, it takes valuable time, energy and concentration from learning and creates a negative environment before school, during and after which affects everyone from the family unit to the school and teachers. A child must feel like they belong or things will start to go very wrong in many ways."</i></p> <p><i>"If they feel unwelcome they will zone out in class, not ask for help from teacher or other class members. Or feel they can't ask for help."</i></p> <p><i>"If they don't feel they belong they become withdrawn, then don't ask for help, they don't make friends as easy. They become hermits in the class. There but not."</i></p> <p><i>"If they feel like they don't belong, disengagement starts. Once this starts, negative attitude creeps in and before long, the student starts performing poorly in class, which can often lead to masking this with poor behaviour, which leads to suspension, missing more school and falling further behind and they then begin the vicious cycle of disengagement."</i></p>
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For those few parents that stated a sense of belonging was not important for learning they explained that their child was self-motivated to learn.

"She tends to just get on with things and try to make the best of every situation. Her learning and school work is the focus."

"They find satisfaction in learning – the motivation is internal. She takes pride in being a tomgirl and not as girly as the majority."

"My son is top of the class in most subjects even though he sometimes feels different from the others."

Practices to support wellbeing

Many parents expressed a desire for their child's wellbeing to be protected and promoted to facilitate safety and belonging. This included students' social emotional wellbeing, dietary requirements, and physical needs. Similar to the supportive environments described by students across Year 3 to Year 12, parents wanted school staff to proactively check-in with students and build relationships that students could place trust in, knowing their concerns would be heard and responded to appropriately. Parents also suggested strategies to position students to have positive learning experiences, to develop confidence, or support for developing quality interpersonal relationships.

"Ask the child often if they are OK."

"She becomes very anxious when she has to start new things such as a new year or a new term. Her teachers need to be mindful of this anxiety and assist her in grounding herself in order for her to settle and begin learning."

"Sometimes mentoring with friendship issues."

"Assistance is more in the area of building self-esteem and confidence rather than issues with curriculum."

"Listen to them when they say something is wrong and not automatically dismiss them, treat them with respect. I believe that kids learn a lot from teachers/staff behaviour a lot of which would never be acceptable in a workplace with adults."

"My child needed more positive care. He needed to feel his educators liked him and he needed to feel that when he went to them for help with bullies that they would help him."

"More psychological support for troubled children."

Parents suggested students would benefit from practices that promote wellbeing. Suggestions included relaxation techniques, mental health education, breaks from learning and physical activity. Such practices would better position students to focus on learning and to respond to feelings of stress and pressure, which were sometimes associated with learning. Holistic support provided through collaboration between professionals (such as teachers and social workers) and within the school environment was proposed as beneficial for students and school staff.

"Mindfulness, meditation and yoga-style practices to give the child some relaxation strategies and therefore a better chance of coping with academic pressures and peer pressure."

"Have mental health tuition classes; i.e. awareness of mental illness, relaxation techniques and awareness and acceptance of themselves which helps improve emotional intelligence."

"Have a strong pastoral care program where students are known well by student leaders and staff. They need to have opportunity to 'shine' in something so that their inclusion is reinforced as being valuable and needed by the group. Our school does this well."

"More counsellors for vulnerable students, more whole school fun activities to engage and boost pupil morale."

Families and school

"It is a community school where parents are very involved. You are made to feel welcome and that you have something to give."

The survey responses indicated that the majority of participating parents can be described as actively involved in their child's education. Active involvement is demonstrated through behaviours such as direct participation in the school or school activities, encouraging homework completion or showing interest in school and learning through asking questions and talking with their child. While parents aspired to engage in such behaviours, they also outlined challenges, such as competing demands impacting on available time and capacity, a lack of communication from schools or a school culture which they felt did not invite or value family involvement.

Direct participation in school

The majority of the parents were actively involved in their child's school which contributed greatly to a sense of belonging. Engagement with the school included serving as members on the board, the Parents and Citizens/Friends Associations (P&C/P&F) or other committees, volunteering in the classroom, school programs, canteen, uniform shop, library or school events, supporting school fundraising activities, providing input or feedback into school planning, or attendance at school events. Many parents stated they purposefully made an effort to get involved in these activities to support their child, and to build relationships with school staff and other parents.

"I attend as many functions at the school as possible and am welcomed by staff and other parents [...]. Others may not attend and may not feel as connected."

"I have made the effort to be a part of the community – and having done so – have been warmly accepted."

"I choose to be actively involved – can't do a lot during the day as I work, but member of P&C and board – through this kept well-informed, and opportunity to ask questions, seek clarifications and contribute to the school."

"I am involved with the school as a parent helper and on the P&C which has enabled me to build relationships with teachers and parents, and be informed about what is happening at the school."

Some parents noted the challenges in direct participation in school activities particularly within school hours, given a range of other commitments or if their child was attending boarding school or learning via distance education. Several parents felt their level of attendance at events was their 'own fault' and that the onus was on them to put in more effort, rather than consideration from schools regarding the lives of families.

"I work and feel that most activities are organised while I am at work."

"Participate as much as we can, although limited with parents both working full time. Have made friends within the school community."

"This is my own fault, I am a full time working mother of 4 and too busy to be involved a lot with the school."

"I am encouraged to attend and be part of events. Unfortunately I work fulltime but make efforts with supplying cakes and classroom stuff to make up for my lack of time."

"As a working parent I have less time to give to the school so this is partially my fault."

Practices to support family participation

Communication

Parents made clear through the survey that they valued communication from the school. Communication contributed to making parents feel welcomed within the school and welcoming of their involvement. Parents were interested in hearing about upcoming events, the learning progress, engagement, behaviour and development of their child, curriculum requirements, school concerns and the reasoning behind decisions of the school. For parents, effective communication was regular, available in a variety of formats and responsive. Effective communication was particularly important for parents that were unable to participate in school activities and for developing familiarity with the school and the education system. Occasionally, parents felt there were assumptions underpinning orientation to a new school and stated all families should receive a comprehensive orientation.

"I'm always updated of what is happening in the school as well as the status of my child in terms of learning, physical and behaviour abilities."

"I would appreciate a parent-teacher meeting even when the teacher says there is nothing to discuss – it's good to meet and ask how they're getting on even when there aren't any problems."

"I would like it if the school educated parents more about what they are doing and why."

"I believe the school's general communication with its community is extremely poor and many parents feel very disconnected and unhappy with the school. A school MUST communicate constantly and consistently with its community, addressing issues head on (instead of deliberately avoiding them), providing explanation for decisions, information about curriculum/programs."

"The program our child is involved in does not really have opportunities for parents to get involved. I would however like more feedback about his progress and his results on a more frequent basis, through parent portals etc."

School culture

For many parents, the culture of the school contributed most strongly to their sense of belonging or lack thereof. Parents who felt a sense of belonging referred to the school as inclusive, a community, welcoming, that they felt valued and their contributions or questions were welcomed. Those parents who did not feel a sense of belonging to the school referred to schools as unfriendly, not welcoming, cliquey, inflexible, and characterised by a lack of communication, opportunities for parental involvement or events.

The actions of the school staff and parents developed the culture of the school, with many parents referring to feeling part of the school community through their interactions with others.

Many parents spoke positively of their relationships with school staff and parents, which contributed to a sense of belonging. Parents felt welcomed when school staff (teachers, administration and leadership teams) and other parents were friendly and approachable. They also noted when school staff made an effort to greet them, were responsive and whether relationships between staff and students were respectful.

"Teachers and staff are always friendly and the school community is generally welcoming."

"Everyone makes you feel welcome and everyone has something to contribute."

"It is an inclusive environment."

"Parents are always welcome to help out at school or in classrooms. The teachers listen to your views and respect your wishes."

"As it is a boarding school and high school parent participation is more difficult but administration staff are friendly and helpful."

"The high school teachers are approachable and I know they will respond and help if I have a concern."

"Headmistress as well as other teachers say hello when I visit the school and I believe they know which are my children."

"There is very little to encourage parents to be involved. Contacting the school can be an intimidating process at times."

"Poor school communication. Staff generally not welcoming and inclusive. Difficult to ask questions without staff becoming defensive. No parent/teacher interviews held."

"Admin is not terribly worried about the normal people."

"High school – told explicitly by the school not to come into school unless invited."

"Not enough information coming out of the school, parents rarely invited to school activities."

For some, relationships with other parents created a sense of belonging where the culture was absent from the school. However for others, other parents within the school made them feel unwelcome or uncomfortable. Parents also noted that relationships among parent groups can be variable between year groups and affect relationships between students.

"I don't feel part of a school community which is set up and led by the school – there simply isn't one. However, through creating our own bonds with parents and the P&C I feel welcomed by my peers and my children's teachers."

"Other parents and own network. Good relationships with some teachers. Not felt that this comes from the current leadership team, where there is poor engagement and communication."

"Other parents include me via email despite being a full time worker and only turning up to school once a week and in high vis clothing."

"I have always felt part of the school community with my daughter but she will leave next year and that feeling will go. Sadly the cohort my son is in are cliquy, pushy and have excluded a group of us who have been at the school for some time. The staff are very inclusive though."

"Many parents don't practise their faith, not attending church and not catechising their kids in the same way I'd like."

"Cliquy parents."

"The parents in the school are generally not very friendly to new families that haven't had their children as long in the school."

Leadership

“This school used to have a principal and a leadership team who encouraged a strong sense of community and ownership – the new leadership team lack warmth and care for both students and parents. I no longer feel welcome to discuss concerns with the principal. It is very cold, clinical and by the book and I no longer feel like my views or ideas are sought or valued.”

Parents noted that the leadership strongly influenced the culture of the school and subsequently their sense of belonging. Many spoke positively of effective leadership and the flow-on effects for school staff, students and families. School leadership affected morale of staff, relationships within the school, parental involvement and whether parents had confidence in the school, in terms of educating children and responding to concerns from parents.

Some parents were less confident in or supportive of the leadership of their child’s school.

“It is critical to the success of children’s education to have committed and enthusiastic teachers, administration staff and as much positive parent involvement as possible. [...] An open and responsible administration team results in a positive relationship between teachers and parents, which creates fantastic outcomes for our kids.”

“Happy with [my child’s school]. Great principal, who is heavily involved with the community feel of this school, as he is always around before/after school, to greet students and parents.”

“I really appreciate the fact that the school principal takes the time to say hello and knows my children’s name. It is a big primary school but I feel it means a lot to know he knows who my kids are.”

“The teachers and principal have made me (and many parents) feel like we belong and are important too. I help as much as I can when I can with my children’s teachers etc.”

“The principal is a “sound bite on legs”, full of jargon but doesn’t deliver. The teachers don’t communicate with parents and are lazy, complacent. I feel very disheartened and worn down. In fact I have given up on being involved at the primary school.”

“The culture of schools and engagement with community is very important. The leadership team needs to have a good relationship with its community. This takes time to establish and needs to be genuine. I feel sad our school is no longer one I feel I can recommend, despite some good teachers.”

“Lack of communication to parents led by principal.”

“I moved my child from another school based on how I felt the principal handled my concern. I felt if I was unable to speak with the principal, how would my child be able to communicate as he grew older.”

“[The school my child attends] has a sense of closure or cliquiness, starting with management. The principal is very dictating and does not tend to consult with staff or parents on school matters. This filters down to the teaching staff, although most teachers are fabulous with the students, they are very reluctant to form a relationship with any parents due to fear of repercussion from the principal.”

“The discipline at the school is lacking and there is a culture of ‘don’t care about anything’ that has changed my child’s motivation to learn.”