

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.¹⁷

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.

Student engagement is important because disengaged students are at risk of a range of adverse academic and social outcomes that have implications beyond the compulsory school years. Critically, disengagement is reciprocal, cyclical and reinforced over time, and it is therefore important to identify problems with engagement early.¹⁸

Student engagement and disengagement is strongly associated with the home and family context and the degree to which parents can economically, socially, and emotionally support children and young people to engage at school. A large volume of Australian and international research consistently shows that children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience markers of disengagement.¹⁹

Poor attendance and engagement at school remains problematic particularly among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, Aboriginal students and students living in remote areas.²⁰ The Longitudinal Study of Australia's Children has also found higher levels of non-attendance among Aboriginal children, children from lone-mother families, children experiencing bullying at school, and children with non-working mothers, than other children.²¹

Due to its complexity, there is no 'one indicator' to measure the prevalence of student disengagement. The literature review therefore examined a range of single markers and found that in Australia about one in five students (20%) could be considered to have some level of disengagement with school.

In setting out to hear from students about the positive and negative factors that influence their engagement in education, a wide range of elements identified as impacting on engagement were canvassed for the consultation in order to understand what factors are important and meaningful to students themselves.

The indicators that emerged from the School and Learning Consultation as meaningful and relevant to students are discussed in Chapter 2 – Engagement Indicators.

WA context

While complexities exist in measuring engagement, at its rawest form engagement can be measured through enrolment, attendance and retention rates.²²

In 2016, there were 443,595 students enrolled across 1,109 schools in WA. More than one-third of schools (40.9% to 36.9%) were located in a regional area and had a combined enrolment of 97,050 students (21.9%).

28,038 or 6.3 per cent of all WA students identified themselves as Aboriginal.²³ Nationally, the enrolment of Aboriginal students in schooling has increased substantially.²⁴

Attendance

Regular school attendance is important for all children and young people to succeed in education and to ensure they do not fall behind socially and developmentally.²⁵

Nationally, student attendance rates are specified as a performance indicator within the National Education Agreement and as a key performance measure (KPM) in the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia. From the year 2014 onwards, nationally comparable student attendance data are being collected.²⁶

The National Report on Schooling Data Portal shows that for WA in 2016, the student attendance rate for all schools was 93.0 per cent in Years 1 to 6 dropping to 89.9 per cent in Years 7 to 10.²⁷ These rates were lower than the national rates for that year (93.5% for Years 1 to 6 and 91.1% for Years 7 to 10).²⁸

Aboriginal students were significantly more likely than other students to attend less than 80 per cent of the time, with the National Report on Schooling Data Portal showing an attendance rate of 76.6 per cent for Aboriginal students in WA in 2016 compared to a rate of 92.9 per cent for non-Aboriginal students. This represents the second lowest attendance rate for Aboriginal students nationally.²⁹ The difference in student attendance rates between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students increases from primary school to high school.³⁰

Nationally, student attendance decreases the further students live from major cities.³¹

Retention

Young people who complete Year 12 or an equivalent education have better health outcomes, better employment outcomes and higher incomes across their lives.³²

In WA, students are required to remain at school or participate in an approved non-school option (such as employment or training) until the end of the year they turn 17 years and 6 months, or graduate from high school.

In 2016, the apparent retention rate Year 10 to Year 12 for all students in WA was 80.5 per cent. This represents an increase from the 76.5 per cent recorded in 2010 but was slightly lower than the equivalent national rate of 82.9 per cent.³³ However, particular groups of students report much lower rates of retention.

It remains of ongoing concern that the proportion of WA Aboriginal students continuing from Year 10 to Year 12 remained as low as 51.4 per cent in 2016, which was significantly below the rate for non-Aboriginal students of 82.3 per cent.³⁴

In regard to students in regional and remote areas, Year 12 completion rates of Australian young people in remote and very remote areas in 2011 were only 56.4 per cent and 43.4 per cent respectively.³⁵

The proportion of Aboriginal young people (20 to 24 years) who had achieved Year 12 or an equivalent qualification varied from 65.6 per cent in outer regional areas to 36.8 per cent in very remote areas.³⁶

In 2015, only 41 per cent of people aged 15 to 64 years with disability had completed Year 12 or an equivalent qualification compared to 61 per cent of people without disability.³⁷

Data on domains of engagement

In regard to the three domains of engagement (cognitive, emotional and behavioural), 2012 data showed that WA students recorded results just below the Australian and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) averages in cognitive and emotional engagement, but just above in behavioural engagement.³⁸ Further, analysis of student dispositions towards school found approximately 30 to 40 per cent of WA students did not feel a sense of belonging, self-confidence, purpose or perseverance.³⁹