

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