Staying on at School:
Strategies for increasing high school completion rates in low retention regions of NSW
STAYING ON AT SCHOOL:
Strategies for increasing high school completion rates in low retention regions of NSW

ARC-linkage research project LP-0989479

Final Report to the New South Wales Department of Education & Communities

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Section 1: Overview
1. Overview

This overview provides an account of the Staying On project from its initial conceptualization to the conclusion of the data gathering phase. Some information based on the first publications is also provided but given the size and quality of the data gathered, publications will continue to be generated for some years to come. Nevertheless, this overview, together with subsequent sections of the Report, does provide clear indications of the insights gained and lessons learned. There are three parts to this initial overview. The first part outlines the work done by the research team between 2009 and 2012, the second provides an account of the ways in which the policy context changed over this period, and the third provides a synopsis of what was learned in the course of this research project.

The remaining sections of the Report provide detailed accounts of the work done. Section 2 provides a detailed description of the research methodology. Section 3, the 2014 School Report, provides a summary of information from the surveys and interviews in relation to the nine participating schools. Section 4 provides information from the research which has not been published elsewhere: this includes preliminary analyses where the interview sample has been separated into more engaged or less engaged students, and some indications regarding the differences that emerge from interviews with them are provided. It also includes three case studies. Section 5 lists the presentations and publications completed so far, based on this research, together with copies of selected papers.

1.1 Designing and conducting the research

As indicated by the title of this project, the original intention was to conduct research in regions of NSW where high school completion rates were low, in order to identify strategies that might increase the likelihood of young people staying on to complete Year 12. During 2008, when discussions between University of Western Sydney and Department of Education and Communities staff began, approximately two thirds of all students in NSW completed Year 12. However, retention rates in some rural regions (Riverina, Hunter, and Western NSW) were much lower. In these regions only approximately 50% of students stayed on. While the overall retention rate for the South Western Sydney Region was close to the State average, there were (and still are) areas of severe disadvantage within South Western Sydney. In many cases these areas or neighbourhoods are associated with secondary schools that have low retention rates. However, within Regions or geographic areas across NSW where most schools have low retention rates, there are also particular schools that have relatively high retention rates. These schools can be described as performing ‘above expectation’.

The decision was made to conduct a research project in three regions: Riverina, Hunter and South Western Sydney. In each region three schools were chosen: two of these schools would be schools that were performing above expectation. For purposes of comparison, the third school in each region would be one that had an overall retention rate close to the average for that region. In March 2009 nine candidate schools were identified. Ethical approval for the research was obtained (NEAF: H6099, and also SERAP: 2008235). Subsequently the nine schools were visited by UWS and CSU staff, and the Principals in each of the schools consented to participate in the study.
During 2009, the research team gained parental consent for surveying 1966 students, and for interviewing 119 students. These were large samples, and all the students in these samples connected with the researchers each year for three years. Thus, three waves of survey administration were completed (2009, 2010, & 2011) with a sample loss of only 200 students, creating a high level of reliability for this study. Across the three years of the study, over 5,500 surveys were administered, coded, entered and analysed. With a data sample of this magnitude one can apply advanced analytical methods, and can have considerable confidence in the results obtained. For example, the identification of parental support, teacher respect and peer relations as central factors supporting student engagement is a very important finding. This provides the basis for the creation and validation of a Social Relational Support for Education scale, as described in Section 1.3.

The size of the interview sample was also substantial. As explained in Section 2, these student interviews took the form of conversations, where students were encouraged to tell the researchers what mattered most to them. These conversations were carried out each year for three years, so that over 300 interviews took place. By selecting cases in which students participated in interviews and surveys consistently over all three years one can identify a sample of 55 for whom we have a consistent longitudinal set of survey and narrative data.

Individual interviews were also conducted with teachers responsible for Year 10 and 11, with Principals and with Transition Coordinators. A detailed account of the data gathering processes and the qualitative and quantitative methodologies used is provided in Section 2.

1.2 Changes in the research context

The Staying On project was conducted in schools located in areas of low socio-economic status. It follows that all the participating schools were characterised by the need to make consistent efforts to encourage their students to complete Year 12. Predictably, these are the schools that will be most substantially affected by the policy changes that were implemented between 2009 and 2012. Since these policy changes coincided with years in which the research was being conducted, the research team was in a unique position to document how schools, teachers, and students were responding to these changes. At the same time, it meant that the researchers were required to recalibrate their objectives as the project proceeded. This section provides an overview of the changes in the research context between 2009 and 2012.

All the changes implemented during this period reflected the overarching policy goal of raising high school completion rates. Nevertheless the details of the specific policies enacted remain important.

In June 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) announced a Compact with young Australians that would establish common national requirements for all young people to participate in schooling or other education and training until the age of 17 years, unless they were employed full-time. This requirement was accompanied by changes in income support regulations, which meant that students who were not in education, or who were not working 25 hours per week, would be ineligible for Youth Allowance. These changes to Youth Allowance came into force from 1 January 2010.
In July 2009, the NSW Department of Education and Communities released an information sheet for parents and students, announcing the raising the school leaving age. This document indicated that from January 2010, students would be required to complete Year 10 and then remain in education or training until at least age 17; in effect, this meant that most students would be remaining at school until the middle of year 11 at least. In 2009, the Board of Studies (BOS) also introduced a pilot draft of a Content Endorsed English Studies course: this became available as a preliminary course for all schools in 2011 and as a Year 12 non-ATAR course in 2012. Five other Content Endorsed Courses such as Work Studies, Exploring Early Childhood, etc., have been introduced alongside English Studies over the past five years. These new courses allow schools to provide a broader curriculum for students who may not immediately be interested in gaining an ATAR as part of their HSC. Whether students are seeking an ATAR or not, a wide range of VET in Schools and TAFE-VET courses are available to them. However, since these courses open students’ horizons to a wide range of occupations, provide pathways to further study at TAFE and facilitate contacts with employers, they play an important role for those students who, in the past, may have left school early.

In August 2011, the Minister for Education announced that the School Certificate would be abolished so that from the beginning of 2012 it would no longer exist. It could be argued that by abolishing the School Certificate, the government had removed a psychological barrier to the direct progression of all students from year 10 to year 11.

The COAG national Compact was supported by the implementation of relevant curriculum and student support measures in all jurisdictions. These had substantial effects on high school completion rates across the nation, as well as in NSW (Lamb, 2011; COAG, 2014). Between 2008 and 2012 the apparent retention rate from years 7/8 to year 12 for all Australian schools rose from 74.6% to 79.9% (ABS, 2013). In New South Wales, the public school retention rate rose from 64.6% to 70.5% over the same five-year period. In the Hunter, Riverina, and South Western Sydney regions, apparent retention rates also rose substantially in line with the overall increase across New South Wales (see Table 1).

Table 1: NSW public school full-time apparent retention rates in selected regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years 7-12 (%)</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>70.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter/Central coast</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>57.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverina</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>52.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SW Sydney</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>74.6</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>79.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As a result of the changes outlined above, the focus of the Staying On study was redefined as the project proceeded. In addition to asking how high school completion rates might be increased, the study also sought to ascertain how schools might encourage the students who were now
staying on to engage with learning, to broaden their horizons, and to pursue education and training pathways consistent with their raised aspirations.

1.3 Lessons learned from the Staying On project

Initially, the intention behind the Staying On project was to identify students who did not like school and planned on leaving before Year 12. The design involved inviting these students to participate in interviews each year in order to track any changes in their attitudes and plans over time. If they changed their plans and decided to stay on, we wanted to know why. What triggered the change? What processes followed? For students who did not ‘turn around’ we also wanted to understand more about their experiences of school and their future plans.

The students we interviewed were all students whose responses to the first surveys suggested that they had very low levels of engagement with school (see Section 2 for more details). However, by the time they reached Year 10 and Year 11, many of these students had re-evaluated their thoughts about what they were hoping for in life and how they wanted things to turn out. These re-evaluations functioned as turning points that led many of these young people to re-engage with learning.

Over the three years of the study, there were 55 students who consistently participated in all aspects of the study. All these students responded to the 1st year and 3rd year surveys and most responded the in 2nd year survey as well. All 55 students were also interviewed at least twice; most were interviewed three times. Survey results indicate that 23 (or 42 percent) of these 55 students became more engaged over the three years, for 13 (24 percent) there was no substantial change, and for the remaining 19 (34 percent), their responses to the survey indicate that they became less engaged over time. These numbers should not be taken to indicate the relative proportions of students across the school population who re-engage with learning. This is because there was a high rate of attrition from our study among those students who were least engaged. Based on other analyses reported in section 4, it seems most likely that among those who are initially not engaged, the proportion that turns around is approximately one in three.

While many students did re-engage with learning, this did not always mean they liked school any more. Often their new learning goals were unconventional and broadly defined. Although some decided to complete Year 12, others started exploring a wide range of education and training opportunities beyond school, through TAFE or through combinations of study and work. The Baxter Secondary College case study illustrates ways in which these students were able to pursue effective pathways to work and further study that did not always involve completing an HSC.

Based on the existing literature (see, for example, Arens, Yeung, Craven, Watermann, & Hasselhorn, 2013; Eccles & Roser, 2011), it was expected that longitudinal analyses would show that students’ levels of academic motivation and engagement would tend to decrease between year 7 and year 10. Our results did bear out this prediction; from year 7 to year 10 the students’ average scores on the motivation and engagement scales fell. However, contrary to the usual expectation, the proportion of students who said they intend to complete Year 12 increased over the same period. It would appear that the raised school leaving age in NSW has led to a larger
proportion of less motivated and less engaged students staying on at school. The presence of relatively large numbers of senior students who are not strongly motivated to study constitutes a significant challenge for schools in areas of low socio-economic status. In our study it became evident that schools are responding to this challenge through institutional reforms that involve a broader curriculum, inclusive pedagogy, and new pathways supporting young people’s transitions to work or further study. These institutional reforms are discussed further below, and are also elaborated in the case studies in section 4. Prior to taking up this issue, the next section of this overview outlines the events, conversations and encounters that function as triggers for change, and the processes that follow as young people turn towards re-engagement.

**Student re-engagement: The triggers and processes**

As indicated above there were 23 students who participated fully in the surveys and interviews, who became more engaged with learning over the 3 years of our research. In addition there were several students who were absent for the final survey, but whose interviews clearly show an increase in their level of engagement with learning. Our study has identified a range of events and conversations that triggered changed attitudes among these students. For some it was a comment made by a parent or a grandmother, who made it clear that they would be ‘... be proud of you if you finished school’. For other young people, it was by observing what happened in the lives of their older peers that they decided they would not want to be like that - unemployed, aimless and unhappy. Persevering with school was worth it if it gave you greater opportunities. In several cases, students talked about their teachers; about the help and support they had been given. Some recalled a comment that signalled to them that they could do well at school. For example, one young woman sought to enrol in work-study as a year 10 elective, but her teacher said, “No, you can’t – you’re too smart for that”. It never occurred to her before this that she was intelligent and good at academic subjects.

These events triggered turning points, but for most students more needed to be done as they began to commit themselves to the new directions they had chosen. Specific changes in their behaviour and social relations would be needed to consolidate what was essentially an identity shift. Students who had resisted their teachers for years began to work with at least one or two of them, define learning goals that made sense to them. These students told us during their interviews that going on at school (or engaging with learning in order to enter a skilled occupation) had now become important to them. They then went on to describe the processes through which their lives were changing. Some had been working in part-time jobs, but had now decided to stop work so that they could focus on study. Others had been hanging out with students who regularly got into trouble or skipped school. These students sought to make new friends and associate themselves with those who did well at school. Sometimes this involved a delicate balancing act so that they no longer joined in with their old friends in misdemeanours but at the same time they did not reject them totally. Some of these students talked about making a greater effort in terms of academic goals. Others continued to be indifferent to school and dislike what they called ‘theory’. Many of these students did however start to focus their energies on a particular vocational direction, aiming to combine study and work in productive ways.

In relation to both the triggers that initiate change and the processes through which new commitments to learning are consolidated, social relationships with teachers, peers and parents play critical roles. Our research indicates that student engagement is strong when students
believe they are respected by their teachers, when they think their parents believe that education matters, and when they associate with peers who care about doing well at school. An important implication of our research is that when schools function as supportive communities, student engagement with learning will be enhanced. In order to make it possible for schools to monitor these key social-relational variables the Staying On project has generated a new measurement scale – the Social Relational Support for Education scale. Vickers, Finger, Barker, & Bodkin-Andrews (2014) have published an article which documents the validation of this scale and discusses its uses. It is provided in Section 5 of this Report.

**Student re-engagement: Curriculum, pedagogy and pathways**

As already indicated, among the students who participated in the research interviews, 42 percent of them provided survey responses which indicated that over the three years of the study they had become more engaged with learning. Others, amounting to 58 percent of those who participated fully in the 3-year research, either remained disengaged with learning or became more disengaged. This latter group of students still wanted to leave school even though they did not have definite plans for further study. They were not backward in telling us what they did not like about school. Almost all of them disliked what they call “theory” which means any pedagogical activities that involve sitting at a desk and reading and writing. Copying what teachers write on the board or what is projected onto a screen would be their least favourite activity. Asked which subjects they liked, they were most likely to name sport, physical education, or subjects that entailed practical activities. Occasionally these students would name an English teacher or drama or music teacher who was able to make the academic subjects they taught interesting and engaging.

Many of the young people with whom we talked year after year seemed bored and even listless when we discussed their lives at school. Some of them showed considerable excitement about activities they engaged with outside of school, such as participation in Army cadets, scouts or guides, sports or surfing. There was little enthusiasm about the “theory” stuff you have to learn at school. However, most of the nine schools in which we conducted our study introduced electives at the year 8 or 9 level. For many of the less engaged students this represented their first opportunity to do a subject they really liked. These electives opened up new horizons and new possibilities, and in some cases created visions of a future life that some students would never have imagined. For example, one student took an agriculture elective and just loved it; two years later he made the transition from high school to a residential agricultural College. Other electives introduced students to fields such as catering, the automotive trades, and the Allied health professions. What appears to be revolutionary about electives is that they can create enthusiasm about learning something in the school context; they can broaden students’ interests, and point towards new learning pathways that may be worth following.

Based on our experience with the Staying On project, we would argue that very little can be done for students who cannot tell you what they are interested in and appear to have no passions. In some cases the only way to engage students is to provide them with opportunities to work intensively on projects related to their own interests. Big Picture Education Australia supports this approach, and recently, Baxter HS has opened a Big Picture academy within the school. Unfortunately, this innovation was introduced after our study concluded. However, many of the students in our study who failed to re-engage made it clear that the amount of time...
given over to elective curricular activities that they were interested in was very small, in comparison with the time allocated to the compulsory subjects that they disliked.

One of the long-standing dilemmas about the purpose of senior secondary schooling centres on the debate between those who would engage students with learning by allowing them to do what they are interested in, versus those who argue that it will always be in the best interests of young people to take on the challenges of the academic curriculum and focus their energies on mastering its content (Vickers, 2012). From our conversations with young people and their teachers one of the lessons we learned is that this is not a debate that teachers should resolve on behalf of their students. Rather it is an issue that young people need to decide for themselves, in conversation with teachers and other adults, peers and parents.

It is not a simple matter for young people to come to understand themselves, their capacities and their interests, and to locate this understanding over and against the confusing array of opportunities that the world may offer them. This is in itself an important curricular objective. At Baxter high school students spend 18 months developing a Portfolio that functions as an application for admission to Year 11. They need to explain what they intend to study and why, what they would like to get from the school, and what they are going to contribute. This is one example of an effective transition pathways support program. Such programs can play an essential role in helping students engage appropriately with the senior years. More detailed accounts of these processes are provided in the case studies provided in Section 4 of this report.

References


Section 2: Research Methodology
SECTION 2

Research Methodology

In the *Staying On* research project, we sought to ask how high school completion rates might be increased and ascertain how schools might encourage the students who are now staying on to engage with learning. Therefore understanding what happens in the lives of young people that might lead them to become more engaged with learning was a key focus. Section 2 of this report provides detailed information on the research methodology employed to examine young people’s engagement. Specifically it highlights the three complementary research strategies that were adopted: first, a substantial longitudinal multi-cohort survey repeated annually over three years; second, three years of narrative interviews with students who were initially the most disengaged participants in the study; and finally, case studies of schools that perform above expectation in terms of retention rates. The significant findings of this project are reported in Sections 3 and 4.

2.1 Quantitative aspects of the *Staying On* project: Longitudinal multi-cohort

2.1.1 Sample

In the first year (2009) of the three year longitudinal study, the sample comprised 1966 students in Years 7 (*n*=650), 8 (*n*=643), and 9 (*n*=673), attending 9 comprehensive, NSW secondary government schools equally distributed across three regions. In 2010, the sample comprised 1768 students from Years 8 through 10 and in the final wave collected in 2011 the sample comprised 1392 students from Years 9 through 11. 

Table 2.1: Sample attrition rate by school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Permission</th>
<th>Left after Wave 1 before completing Wave 2</th>
<th>Left after Wave 2 before completing Wave 3</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rustion</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plumsville</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strawston</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liverstone</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angland</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bluefield</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redton</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitville</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All schools</td>
<td>2070</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the three regions selected to participate in the study the first can be classified as urban, the second is primarily an agricultural rural region and the third region contains a mixture of coastal agricultural and mining enterprises. In all three regions the indicators for socio-economic status suggest a relatively low overall average status. In consultation with the NSW Department of Education and Communities six of these nine schools were value-adding schools (two per region) and were selected using the following criteria: (i) schools with demographic profiles associated with very low retention rates (based on SES scores, Indigeneity, and in the agricultural rural schools, remoteness), (ii) schools with retention rates above what might be expected, given the school’s demographic profile, and (iii) schools that implement promising strategies for improving retention, such as intensive attendance monitoring, frequent teacher feedback to parents and students, and provision of VET studies. Three comparison schools (one per region) were selected because although they have very similar demographic profiles to the value-adding schools, their retention rates are as expected given their profiles.

2.1.2 Procedure

Administration of the questionnaire was completed by the Chief Investigators in collaboration with Research Assistants and in Region 3 the teachers facilitated with the administration. The questionnaires were read aloud to the students. The questionnaires took approximately 45 minutes to complete. They comprised 6 themed parts and there was a 7th theme added to the questionnaire for students completing the survey in Years 9 and above which related to working in a job while at school.

2.1.3 Questionnaires

The questionnaires were purposefully designed to include a strong focus on engagement and motivation since research provides empirical evidence substantiating that various manifestations of student engagement affects school completion and dropout (Zvoch, 2006). The questionnaires also aimed to identify students’ intentions regarding completing school, attitudinal data related to potential reasons for leaving school, aspirations beyond school, information about students’ experiences and perspectives of the school(s) they attended, data on participation in part-time employment, extra curricula activities, and family background and demographic data.

Although the questionnaires contained parallel themes across the three years, there were additional categories added to specific parts of the questionnaire for the second and third years of the study. These additions were necessary to capture relevant engagement issues students confronted as they progressed through school. Therefore the questionnaires provided a powerful tool to examine how school plays out in young people’s lives in the short and long term.

Table 2.2 outlines the key components and affiliated themes of the questionnaire for Wave 1 (2009) as well as the additions made to the questionnaire for the subsequent two years. The instrument focus in Table 2.2 details the types of items included within the themes. Many of these items were drawn from scales of well-established rigorously tested instruments such as the Self-Description Questionnaire, Student Motivation and Engagement Scale, and Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY).

Table 2.2: Components and additions to the students’ questionnaires
**Wave 1 (2009) questionnaire**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Instrument focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part 1</td>
<td>You and your family</td>
<td>Demographics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2</td>
<td>You and your school</td>
<td>Attendance and extra curricula activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 3</td>
<td>Motivation and learning</td>
<td>Value of schooling, persistence, self-sabotage and disengagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 4</td>
<td>Self-confidence at school</td>
<td>English, mathematics and school affect self-concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 5</td>
<td>How I feel about school</td>
<td>Sense of inclusion at school, value coherence, parent support, teacher respect at school and friends at school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 6</td>
<td>Your plans for school and beyond</td>
<td>Leaving school plans, studying and work plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 7</td>
<td>Working in a job while at school</td>
<td>Part-time work, reasons for working and not working, and the nature of work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Wave 2 (2010) questionnaire: additions to the 2009 survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Instrument focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part 2a</td>
<td>You and your school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2b</td>
<td>Your life outside of school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 4a</td>
<td>Self-confidence at school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 4b</td>
<td>Schoolwork</td>
<td>Achievement ratings in English and Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 5a</td>
<td>How I feel about school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 5b</td>
<td>What you value in life</td>
<td>Learning outside of school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Wave 3 (2011) questionnaire: additions to the 2010 survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Instrument focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part 4a</td>
<td>Self-confidence at school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 4b</td>
<td>Electives and subjects you choose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 4c</td>
<td>Choices in relation to subjects you study</td>
<td>Affect for subject choices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.1.4 Analyses

The first step of analyses entailed evaluating the psychometric properties of the scales for internal consistency, reliability, stability over time, factor structure and invariance across groups utilising Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Following these essential preliminary analyses it was possible to conduct inferential statistics (e.g. Analysis of Variance, T-tests) to explicate what factors are instrumental to completing school (e.g. teachers’ respect, parental
support, friends at school) and how these differed or not for critical groups (leavers vs completers; grade level, and gender). More sophisticated analyses such as Multi-Indicator-Multiple-Cause Models (MIMIC) were utilised to examine how grade levels and gender may effect important factors critical to a young person making a decision to either stay on or leave school early. Additionally, Structural Equation Modeling was utilised to delineate the casually predominant factors that explain school engagement which is a strong predictor for school completion and dropout. The results from these analyses are presented in Sections 3 and 4. Furthermore, Section 5 includes details of the dissemination and publications of from these analyses.

2.2 Qualitative aspects of the Staying On project: Narrative Interviews

Along with the extensive quantitative data collected through surveys of students in nine secondary schools across three regions of NSW, the Staying On project undertook an intensive, longitudinal qualitative study involving a sample of students from these schools who were identified from the first wave of survey data as likely to leave school early and/or who were substantially disengaged with school. The aim was to recruit five students from each of Years 7, 8 and 9 in each of the nine schools in 2009 and to follow them through a series of research ‘conversations’ in each of 2009, 2010 and 2011.

2.2.1 Sample

In 2009, the sample consisted of 119 students across the nine schools. With one exception, the number of boys selected from each year is consistently higher than girls from the same year across each region (Table 1). This is not surprising, given that the school completion rate for girls is consistently higher than that for boys (McMillan & Marks, 2003).

In a sample that has been chosen on the basis of self-indication of substantial disengagement with school and/or likelihood to leave school early, it was to be expected that there might be substantial decay in the sample numbers as the students grew older. However, the NSW legislation in 2009 to raise the school leaving age and some judicious ‘back-filling’ in some of the schools where the initial recruitment to interviews had not been as consistent as others, meant that this decay was not as large as might have been (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 1: Gender distribution of students in each Year and each region in 2009 (n=119).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year / Region</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Region 1</td>
<td>Region 1</td>
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<td>Region 3</td>
<td>Region 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Distribution of students in each Year and each region in 2010 (n=105).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year / Region</th>
<th>Region 1</th>
<th>Region 2</th>
<th>Region 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year / Region</td>
<td>Region 1</td>
<td>Region 2</td>
<td>Region 3</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8 (Year 7 in 2009)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9 (Year 8 in 2009)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10 (Year 9 in 2009)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Distribution of students in each Year and each region in 2011 (n=78).

2.2.2 Method

The Staying On project used a narrative inquiry approach based on in-depth research conversations, where students can develop narrative accounts through interactions and joint construction with pairs of researchers. Detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements were generated (Riessman, 2008). In such conversations, the interviewer-interviewee relationship is transformed into one of narrator and listener. The stories the students told, which may seem to the researchers to wander off the 'point', actually constituted the material needed to understand how the young people created meaning out of their lives—and constructed their identity (Chase, 2005).

As far as possible, the conversations were driven by the young people with the researchers providing general questions to stimulate discussion around areas such as the students’ views of school, factors that influence their educational decision-making and the implications of their perspectives and experiences for the structure, policy and practices of secondary schooling. The aim was to encourage maximum possible opportunity for the young people to identify their own issues. The purpose of the conversation was not only to allow students to expand on their survey responses, but also to provide an opportunity to explore issues which were not canvassed in the survey.

With a few exceptions where students feel more secure in a group conversation, students spoke individually with pairs of researchers. The conversations were video- and audio-recorded, provided parental consent and student assent was given. Audio-files were transcribed and the transcriptions were validated using the video where available. The interview data was organised using NVivo. Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and thematic analysis (Langridge & Haggar-Johnson, 2009) were used to identify patterns and themes and patterns. These themes were then combined with the quantitative analysis to explore questions and theories.
Challenges to the method

The aim of the research conversations aspect of the *Staying On* was to track over 3 years a group of students who indicated through written survey questions that they were disengaged with school and likely to leave before completion of Year 12. In 2009, these students were in Years 7, 8 and 9. There are three main challenges that have arisen in the approach being taken:

- identification of students;
- ethical issues around student assent; and
- longitudinal aspects.

Identification of the students

Young people were chosen for the research conversation aspect of the overall project on the basis that they were perceived to indicate that they were intending to leave school before the end of Year 12 and/or that they were substantially disengaged with school. Ambiguity in the way the question relating to when students intended to leave school was interpreted did lead to a small number of students who were actually highly engaged and motivated to complete Year 12 being included in the research conversations sample. These students were not included in the 2010 round of conversations and others who were deemed to have the intended characteristics were added to the sample in 2010.

Ethical issues around student assent

While most students were very keen to be involved in the research conversations and to have the opportunity to tell their stories in what they perceived to be a safe environment, for a small number of students it was clear that they would have preferred not to be involved. However, perhaps under some pressure from their parent(s) or teacher(s), they reluctantly came along. The researchers have been assiduous in ensuring that all students were asked directly before the commencement of the conversation if they were happy to be involved. No student has yet indicated their desire to leave at this stage, although it has been made clear that there would be no negative consequences if they did so. However, some students have indicated that they would prefer not to be video-recorded. Of course, if the parent has not consented to such recording, the student is not even asked. While the lack of refusal is perhaps not unusual in school-based research and may be a reflection of the power differentials between school students and adults in the school, there were some signs in the 2010 round of conversations that some students may have used less direct means such as absenting themselves from school on the days of the interviews, in order to avoid the conversations. Of course, it is perfectly within their rights to avoid the conversations, if not to absent themselves from school. Similar avoidance strategies in quite different contexts have been noted by both Dockett et al. (2009) and Liamputtong (2007).

Longitudinal aspects

It is ambitious to set out to follow a group of students from Years 7, 8 and 9 over 3 years, particularly students who have given some indications that they are likely to leave school before they complete Year 12. Some will move schools and be lost to the project. Others will simply choose not to be involved. Others will leave school and move into the local or other communities, perhaps but not necessarily, into employment or further training. The *Staying On* project team decided that students who moved out of the project schools into other schools
were lost to the project and would not be pursued. On the other hand, for those who left school from the project schools, attempts were made to maintain contact and to continue the research conversations. Only a small number of such young people agreed to be interviewed after they left school. The findings from the interviews are reported in Sections 3 and 4.

2.2.3 Case studies

One value-adding school from each of the three regions was selected for a case study to examine the initiatives and specific strategies implemented to engage the students who are now staying on. Each of the three case studies provide contextual information and highlight the innovations that appear to be making a difference to students’ engagement with learning and facilitating students to engage appropriately in the senior years. The case studies illustrate ways in which students were able to pursue effective pathways to work and further study that did not always involve completing an HSC. Interviews with school staff, students and document analyses were instrumental to developing these case studies. Section 4 includes three case studies from each of the regions.

References


Section 3: Report on Nine Schools Across Three Waves
Staying On At School

2014 School Report

Results: nine schools
Staying On At School
2014 School Report
Results from 2009-2011 data
With Special Thanks To

The Staying On Team would like to acknowledge the continual support and contribution of the Principals, staff, and students from the nine NSW secondary schools participating in the Staying On Project.
SELF-CONCEPT

DESCRIPTION OF SELF-CONCEPT TERMS

AVERAGE STUDENT SELF-CONCEPT IN VARIOUS SCHOOL AREAS

FEMALE AND MALE SELF-CONCEPT IN VARIOUS SCHOOL AREAS

YEAR GROUP SELF-CONCEPT DIFFERENCES IN VARIOUS SCHOOL AREAS

SOCIAL RELATIONAL SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

DESCRIPTION OF TERMS FOR SOCIAL RELATIONAL SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

AVERAGE SOCIAL RELATIONAL SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

FEMALE AND MALE SOCIAL RELATIONAL SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

SOCIAL RELATIONAL SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION BY YEAR GROUP

SKIPPING SCHOOL

SKIPPING CLASSES, ARRIVING LATE, AND MISSING DAYS OF SCHOOL

FREQUENCY OF SKIPPING CLASS

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FEMALE AND MALE STUDENTS SKIPPING CLASS

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN YEAR GROUPS IN SKIPPING CLASSES

FREQUENCY OF ARRIVING LATE FOR SCHOOL

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FEMALE AND MALE STUDENTS ARRIVING LATE

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN YEAR GROUPS IN ARRIVING LATE

FREQUENCY OF MISSING A DAY OF SCHOOL

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FEMALES AND MALES MISSING A DAY

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN YEAR GROUPS IN MISSING A DAY

REASONS FOR MISSING A DAY OF SCHOOL

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Executive Summary

This 2014 Staying On School Report constitutes a simple compilation of the data obtained by the Staying On project over the three years of operation. The Overview Report included in this portfolio offers a more interpretive text, indicating the lessons learned from the research. The Staying On project was originally designed to examine why some students leave school early while others stay on, and to explore the challenges faced by students in completing secondary school.

The study was supported by the NSW Department of Education and Communities and the Australian Research Council. It was conducted by the University of Western Sydney and Charles Sturt University.

This report summarises the outcomes from all three rounds of survey data, aggregated across the nine participating schools. In 2009, the first year of the study, 1966 Year 7, 8, and 9 students took part. In 2010, 1768 Year 8, 9, and 10 students took part and 1392 Year 9, 10 and 11 students took part in 2011. Thus, the level of attrition of the survey sample across the three years of the study was quite small.

The results presented in this report relate to student motivation and engagement at school, school attendance, student perceptions of parental, teacher and peer support for education, student self-concept in various educational domains, and students’ intentions to leave early or to complete Year 12 at school.

In addition to the surveys, interviews were held with 119 students in 2009, 105 students in 2010, and 78 students in 2011. These young people were chosen on the basis of responses to the first survey which indicated that they were intending to leave school early, were disengaged from school, or both. This overview report provides some of the suggestions these young people made regarding how they thought school could be improved.
Background Details

The Staying On Project is a 3 year study investigating student retention within NSW secondary schools. The data for this report was collected during the first two years of this study, and is a progressive look at factors affecting staying on at school over time.

Participants
Years 7, 8, and 9 students from 9 NSW Secondary Schools took part in the Staying On survey

Year 1 of the study
1966 students took part in the first year of the study. 987 students were female (males = 979), 650 students were in Year 7, 643 students were in Year 8, and 673 were in Year 9.

Year 2 of the study
1768 students took part in the second year of the study. 887 students were female (males = 881), 597 students were in Year 8, 577 students were in Year 9, and 594 were in Year 10.

Year 3 of the study
In the final year of the study 1392 students took part. Students who had been involved in the first wave of the study in Years 7, 8 and 9 had moved through into Years 9, 10 and 11.

Research Design
Students took part in the Staying On survey once during 2009 and once during 2010.

How to read the results
Results are presented for the data from all schools. These are presented as graphs, with text added for clarification of the graphs included. Within all graphs, the orange column or orange line represents the data from all schools during Year 1 of the study, and the purple columns or purple lines represent data from all schools during Year 2 of the study.

Instruments
Four instruments were used to measure student engagement and related domains. See Table 1 for details of the instruments used.
“My life is a big question mark”

Anonymous Year 8 Student Quote, 2009
Staying On Project

“Like before when it was just like ‘Oh it’s only school’. I have so much more to do, not just school. But now I’ve realised that school is more important than just doing nothing.”

Anonymous [7045 ‘Alice’] Year 9 Student Quote, 2011
Staying on Project
### Table 1: Student Instruments Used Within the Staying On Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Instrument</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Motivation and Engagement Wheel</strong> <em>(Martin, 2003)</em></td>
<td>Measures student motivation and engagement at school. This scale contains 11 domains of school motivation, measuring adaptive cognition (self-efficacy, value of schooling, mastery orientation), adaptive behaviour (planning, task management, persistence), impeding/maladaptive cognition (anxiety, failure avoidance, uncertain control), and maladaptive behaviour (self-handicapping, disengagement). The domains Value of Schooling, Persistence, Self-Sabotage/Self-Handicapping, and Disengagement were chosen for this project. Students responded indicating how engaged they were at school along a five-point scale (1=Completely Disagree to 6=Completely Agree).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Description Questionnaire II</strong> <em>(SDQI-E; Marsh, 1990b)</em></td>
<td>Measures 12 student self-concept domains (student perceptions of themselves in specific life areas) (see Appendix 2). For the purposes of this report, 7 domains will be examined (these domains are closely related to school bullying; see Marsh, Parada, Craven, &amp; Finger, 2004): (1) Opposite-Sex Relations; (2) Same-Sex Relations; (3) Social Relations; (4) Parental Relations; (5) Honesty/Trustworthiness; (6) Emotional Stability; and (7) General Self-Esteem. The SDQI-E is made of a five-point scale (1=Completely Agree to 6=Completely Disagree). High scores represent high self-concept in the corresponding domain, and low scores indicate low self-concept in that domain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Relational Support for Education</strong></td>
<td>A new measure was developed to tap further social relational support for education. Five domains were developed: (1) Perceived parental support for education; (2) Teacher respect at school; (3) Value coherence; (4) Belonging at school; and (5) Friends at school. Students reported on their perceptions of social relational support along a five-point scale (1=Completely Disagree to 6=Completely Agree). High scores indicate that students perceive they have strong social relational support for their schooling, and low scores indicate that students perceive they do not have strong social relational support for their schooling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Single-item Measures</strong></td>
<td>A number of further questions were also added to the Staying On questionnaire. These included single-item questions related to student family and home background, student attendance at school, and the number of hours students spent undertaking homework and extra-curricular activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key Findings

The following details are a selection of key findings:

- A higher percentage of students in 2011 reported that they intended to complete Year 12 schooling, than students in either 2009 or 2010.

- A slightly lower average of social relational support for education was found over time when comparing student responses between 2009 and 2011.

- On average, results for students in 2011 indicated similar or slightly higher scores relating the value of schooling and persisting with schoolwork than in 2009-10. Results in 2011 also revealed a similar rate of disengagement at school.

- Students had a slightly lower self-concept in maths compared to both 2009 and 2010, while their self-concept in English remained consistent with that in 2010. Students in 2011 had a similar enjoyment of school to that in 2010.

- A slightly lower average of social relational support for education was found over time when comparing student responses between 2009 and 2011; and

- Students were more likely to arrive late for school and miss a day of school in 2011 than 2009 or 2010.
Some Themes Emerging from the Qualitative Data

Introduction

As well as the surveys conducted as part of the Staying On at school project, interviews have been held with a small number of young people from each of the nine schools in the study. These young people were chosen on the basis of an indication, given in their responses to the first survey, that they were intending to leave school early, were seriously disengaged from school or both. They also gave their assent to their involvement in the interviews. Parental consent was also given.

The table below shows the number of boys and girls in the qualitative study by region, in 2009 and 2010. The number of boys is consistently higher across each region. This is not surprising, given that the school completion rate for girls is consistently higher than that for boys.

Table 2: Frequencies of Boys and Girls involved in the Qualitative Study by Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative regions</th>
<th>Region 1</th>
<th>Region 2</th>
<th>Region 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys 2009</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls 2009</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>Boys 2010</td>
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<td>21</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boys 2011</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls 2011</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total number of boys in the qualitative study was 74 in 2009, 65 in 2010 and 47 in 2011. The total number of girls was 45 in 2009 36 in 2010 and 30 in 2011. Each of the interviews was conducted as an informal conversation, covering a wide range of topics and generating a very large amount of data.
The data from the 2009, 2010 and 2012 interviews have been extensively analysed. What follows is a brief overview of some of the main areas of interest emerging from the data for all students involved in the interviews.

**How to improve school**

The interviewers asked the young people “how they thought school could be improved”, or “what would make school a better place for you, or for young people in general?” A number of themes have been identified in the responses given to this question. In order of the total number of students who mentioned them, the themes are:

- Make learning fun, active, relevant for all students;
- Better and cleaner facilities, more resources;
- A desire for better relationships with their teachers;
- A wider range of subject choices and activities (including social and sporting activities);
- Deal with the disruptive behaviour of some students and bullying; and
- More flexibility in the timetable, more free time, and “leniency”.

The first two themes are very strong and were each raised by more than a third of the young people who provided comments on how to improve school.

**Making learning fun, active and more relevant for all students.**

This appears to be of equally strong significance for both boys and girls in the interview sample.

Students commented that they are bored in classes where all they do is read and copy out of text books or from overheads or the board. There were many comments that the students preferred learning when it is active or practical, when they are allowed to work and interact in groups and where there is an element of fun and “excitement” in it for them. What students mean by “fun” appears to include being actively involved in things that they find interesting, with teachers who are can balance
friendliness with maintaining control and holding the students’ interest.

Additionally, many students appear to define a “good teacher” as one that is fun, sociable and approachable. In contrast, students seem likely to label teachers that are boring and grumpy as “bad teachers” in their interviews.

There were also a number of comments about “too many overheads” and teachers not giving students enough time to take it all in at their own pace:

Examples of this are:

*Make the lessons more interesting, not so drawn out.*

**So how could they do that, what sorts of things might make the lessons more interesting?**

*More interactive stuff with the students and things like that.*


******

*Just like, my history teacher she is like puts an overhead up and then like ten minutes later she is changing it, and you don’t really have time to think about it.*

******

**What could they do to make it more interesting and less boring for you?**

*Instead of just blabbering on and putting overheads up and stuff like that, just get right to the point and make the lessons more fun.*

******

*Ah, probably try and change the way they teach, more to be friendly to the kids and all that, so that we actually understand it and not learn it and test straight away.*

******

**What could they do to make school a better place?**

*Make it better for kids who don’t like school and try to encourage them more.*

******

**Anything else that you would change about school?**

*I would probably change um ... really I would just change the atmosphere of it..........*

*Yeah. Make it happier and not have that many people act so down and all that.*

******

**What would better teachers look like. What would you want them to do?**

*Have fun with the class and teach them at the same time.*
...... I don't know there's not really anything too much wrong with the classes and stuff it just needs to be more exciting, like it's boring.

So how much of a difference do you think the teacher makes to you liking a subject? A lot.

What's a good teacher to you, what makes a good teacher?
Um, a teacher that makes it fun, or doesn't yell at you heaps. [smiles]

And so are you having any hassles?
Like what?
Hassles, like people, are you skipping or being late?
Yeah, I am late.
What else?
History, but my history teacher is a bit angry all the time.
Really, angry with who?
Just everyone, he is just like a grumpy man.

And back to your English teacher, you said she makes it fun, so what does she do to make it fun?
Well this semester we are doing drama but like, she tells us like to act it, instead of just staying there and writing stuff out.

And last year I got really down, I had depression for a while and like so that made school hard as well.

Do you get on well with your teachers would you say?
Yeah, yeah, good teachers. Like even if I'm not well in their class with them they're ... Like we can still have a joke with them at lunch and stuff like that.

And how does it compare to the other teachers, because you said that most of them are fairly helpful, but how does she stand out above?
She's got a lot more positive attitude towards helping.
Okay, that's good. So what kind of - so it is pretty practical stuff so when you've got trouble on the computer or something?
Yeah. She's like, she is more cheerful whereas other teachers are kind of grumpy that they have to keep helping some students.
Better and cleaner facilities, more resources

This was a strong theme for both girls and boys, and is a slightly stronger issue for girls than boys. The young people involved in the study appear to be acutely aware of their surroundings and critical of what they saw as the inadequacies, and “decency”, of the school facilities and resources available to them. This related to things such as cleanliness, overcrowding, comfort and room to move, computers and IT equipment, learning spaces, and sporting (and other) facilities.

Cleaning:
Comments related to the state of the school in general, and toilets in particular.

If you could make school a better place, what would you do? What would you change?
The toilets, they are dirty.

So if you think about this school and the fact that you are here, how could it be made better?
Burn it down and start again.

What things would be better at school, how could things be improved?
Fix it, fix it up, just the look of it, like all the classrooms are disgusting, like chewy under the desks and the carpets, they are getting new carpets in some of the classrooms but the rest are just yuk. And they’ve got aboriginal paintings outside, but they could make it look better, it just looks yuk. The only nice buildings they have are the offices and stuff, they are new.

The plumbing in the toilets doesn’t work, they don’t flush, the paint is scratched off, they smell putrid – there’s one bunch of girls who are always smoking there and the teachers can’t stop it.

Overcrowding and room to move:
There is a strong theme about not enough space for students to relax and feel at home, and a sense that the school should be a more spacious and comfortable learning environment.

Some examples:
To make school a better place for students I would change the environment – have more open areas and a quiet area where students can sit and talk.
What things do you think could be improved about this school? If you could talk to the teachers and say oh I would like that fixed up or I’d like something done differently?

I don’t know, probably more time on computers and stuff, and more seats with shade around the school, ‘cos there’s not very many, and it’s getting quite hot.

Do you have any suggestions for how schools would be a better place? What would you change to make them better?

Probably a better environment and um, more resources and equipment, so it makes the children want to learn more.

You can’t put the heater on because they’re broken and the repairman doesn’t come in every month and stuff, or when he’s supposed to. It’s the cold and I just can’t work because of the shaking (from the cold).

So just say you had power over the school and you could change anything about it, what do you think you would change?

Probably like the way the place is set out. I think it would be better if it was like things were closer together so you wouldn’t have to walk up and down the whole school to get to a different class.

Computers, technology and other resources

Some of the comments related to the adequacy of computing and other technology. Others related to the need for improved learning facilities and specialist spaces. For example:

What sort of things would you change about school if you could change anything?

It’s not that bad.

Yeah. School ain’t that bad I reckon. It’s pretty good like, there’s nuthin’ much to change. Bit better class rooms but, pretty bodgo. Get some new stuff like electronics.

So you like the new electronics at school?

Yeah. More TVs, better TVs, DVD. Everything is broken like um projectors and that, broken and everything’s pretty broken.
*****

... you know we need some equipment like in Electric we need more space or – most people like want to study electronics so yeah, so the space is like 30 or 31 students per class, so we need a bigger classroom 'cause like more people want to study it and equipment and classroom is too small and, yeah.

*****

I would prefer it if they had the textbooks on the laptops because that’d be a lot easier then. And I’d prefer all the teachers to use the laptops instead of just every now and [then]...

****

If you could change anything about the school, what would you change?

I guess more of the equipment, like here, they’ve got a whiteboard, most some – probably the only other whiteboard you will ever see is in the J block computer room. Just get more supplies.

Relationships with Teachers

Positive student-teacher relationships have been found, for both males and females, to be significantly and positively related to the likelihood of participation in education and training at age 17.1

Comments made by the young people interviewed in this study also confirm the importance to them of good relationships with their teachers. This theme appears to be much stronger for the girls in our study than for the boys.

Comments related to anger, lack of control, unfairness of some teachers, compared with the friendliness, of others, in their relationships with students, as opposed to teaching methods, pedagogy, which is the focus on the first theme – “Make learning fun, active and relevant for all students”. However, both themes can be seen as part of a larger theme about the importance the students place on their teachers and their relationship with them. Respect for students is also an aspect of this theme.

Respect is also an important aspect of this theme. Students appear to establish better relationships with teachers by whom they feel respected. Consequently, the students tend to have greater respect for those teachers

How could you – what would you do about the teachers? What would your advice be?

---

Just to relax and have a good time and not always angry – just have fun with teaching ‘n’ that.

*****

The teachers could be a bit happier, like they usually are all angry.

*****

In what ways would you like to see the school operate a bit differently?

Yeah. Some of the teachers, they can’t control the class and they keep giving us detentions because they can’t control us.

*****

The teachers could be a bit happier, like they usually are all angry.

So in particular, like they could improve the school like being happier and relating better?

Yeah, like some teachers, like in PE and cooking technology, they’re all happy and they’re all nice and they are not – they are like,” hello, how are you going?”

***

A group of us, maybe ten of us just cut the class because we didn’t like the teacher.

*****

Why do you like school this year more than last year?

Well you get more privileges, like the teachers treat you differently, more as an adult. They are better.

*****

How are your teachers with you?

Um, they are really nice, they help me out a lot. I have learnt heaps in Metals and Automotive. I’ve learnt stacks of stuff.

*****

What do you think about the teachers or?

Teachers. I have noticed like they are people as well so they deserve respect. So they are actually not that bad.

*****

Yeah, and then the maths teacher I don’t know, thinks he’s something real big or something, thinks he can put it over everybody. He just really pissing me right off.

You don’t like that?

No. And then my other teachers, I don’t know, they don’t really worry me.

*****

Do you have any teachers that you particularly like?
Not really. Not fussed on them, they are just teachers I guess.

So any you don't like?

It is not that I don’t really like them, I just don’t like them – don’t not like them, but I don’t like them.

Do you think it would be possible for you to like a teacher?

Probably not.

*****

The teachers are nice, I know them, they know me, they say hello when they see me. I feel accepted. I feel proud of this school.

*****

How do [your teachers] show that they care?

Well, by teaching them and by not just giving up on them when they’re doing something bad.
Staying On at School

This section details student intentions to leave school before completing Year 12.
“A higher percentage of students in 2011 reported that they intended to complete Year 12 schooling, than students in either 2009 or 2010”
ALL SCHOOLS DATA (ORANGE COLUMN)
In 2009, approximately 73% of students reported they were intending to complete Year 12, approximately 10% gave a specific time when they intended to leave prior to completing Year 12 (e.g., Year 9, 10, or 11), and 17% reported other less specific times or were unsure about when they would leave (see Figure 1 and Table 3).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
A slightly higher percentage of students during 2010 reported they intended to complete Year 12 schooling, than students in 2009. In 2010, approximately 75% of students reported they were intending to complete Year 12, approximately 8% gave a specific time when they intended to leave prior to completing Year 12 (e.g., Year 9, 10, or 11), and 17% reported other less specific times or were unsure about when they would leave. This indicator is the only one to move in a positive direction between 2009 and 2010.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
In 2011 a slightly higher percentage of students than either 2009 or 2010 reported that they intended to complete Year 12 at school, indicating a positive trend in this indicator. Approximately 81% of students indicated that they intended to complete Year 12, whilst 9% indicated that they intended to leave prior to completing Year 12, 10% were either unsure or reported less specific times for leaving school.
### Table 3: Percentage of Student Intentions of Staying On at School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intention of Staying On</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completing Year 12</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Prior to Year 12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g., unsure)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Female and Male Intentions of Staying On at School

ALL SCHOOLS DATA (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, females were more likely to report that they intended to stay on at school than males, and males were more likely to report that they intended to leave school early than females (see Figure 2 and Table 4).

All SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
On average, similar trends were found across 2009 and 2010. Females were more likely to report that they intended to stay on in school than males, and males were more likely to report they intended to leave school earlier than females. In addition, in 2010, a slight increase occurred with intentions to stay on and complete school. That is, approximately 80% of female students and 70% of male students reported they intended to stay on and complete year 12. Furthermore, males reported that they were less likely to leave school during Years 9, 10, or 11 in comparison to the results of 2009.

All SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
Similar trends to 2009 and 2010 for males and females indicating their staying on at school plans continued for 2011. 86% females reported that they intended to stay on in school compared to males at 76%, and males were more likely to report that they intended to leave school earlier than females. A slight increase in the intentions of both males and females to stay on at school also occurred in 2011. However, males reported that they were also slightly more likely than in 2010 to leave school during years 9, 10 or 11.
### Table 4: Percentage of Female and Male Intentions of Staying On at School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intention of Staying On</th>
<th>2009 Female</th>
<th>2009 Male</th>
<th>2010 Female</th>
<th>2010 Male</th>
<th>2011 Female</th>
<th>2011 Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completing Year 12</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Prior to Year 12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g., unsure)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Intentions of Staying On at School By Year Group

Figure 3. Percentage of Students Staying On at School By Year Group.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, a similar percentage of Year 7, 8, and 9 students reported they were intending to complete Year 12, and reported an intention to leave prior to Year 12. Year 7 and 8 students were also more likely to report they were unsure when they would leave, or were unspecific about when they would leave compared to Year 9 students (see Figure 3 and Table 5).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
Similar patterns of results were found across 2009 and 2010. All year groups in 2010 revealed an almost equal percentage of students reporting they were intending to complete Year 12 and reported an intention to leave prior to Year 12, when compared to 2009.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
In general, a slightly increasing number of students from each of Years 9, 10 and 11 in 2011 reported that they wanted to stay on at school compared to their stated intentions during 2010. Generally, in 2011, fewer Years 9 and 11 students indicated that they would leave before Year 12 than they did in 2010, but more Year 10 students indicated that they would leave than previously in 2009 or 2010.
Table 5: Percentage of Students Staying On at School By Year Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intention of Staying On</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completing Year 12</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Prior to Year 12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g., unsure)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student Motivation

This section details student motivation at school. This can impact on their engagement in school.
Description of Motivation Terms

Four areas of motivation were assessed within the Staying On questionnaire (see Table 1). These were:
1. Value of Schooling;
2. Persistence;
3. Self-Sabotage/ Self-Handicapping; and
4. Disengagement.
All areas of motivation were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = completely disagree, to 5 = completely agree.

VALUE OF SCHOOLING
Value of schooling measures students’ perceptions on the importance of school. Questions include:
- What I learn at school will be useful one day
- Learning at school is important
High scores represent that students consider school to be important, and low scores represent that students do not consider school to be important.

PERSISTENCE
Persistence measures students’ perseverance with challenging schoolwork. Questions include:
- If I can’t understand my schoolwork, I keep trying until I do
- I’ll keep working at difficult schoolwork until I’ve worked it out
High scores represent that students persevere with difficult schoolwork, and low scores represent that students give up trying to understand challenging schoolwork.

SELF-SABOTAGE/ SELF-HANDICAPPING
Self-sabotage measures students’ use of behaviours that hinder their ability to do well at school. For example this may include procrastinating, wasting time, and leaving homework until the last moment. Questions include:
- When I don’t work hard, I have an excuse if I do badly
- Sometimes I don’t try hard at school so I can have a reason if I don’t do well
High scores represent that students behave in ways that hinder their ability to do well at school, and low scores represent that students behave in ways that help them succeed at school.

DISENGAGEMENT
Disengagement measures students’ interest and involvement at school. Questions include:
- Each week I’m trying less and less at school
- I don’t really care about school anymore
High scores indicate that students are disengaged at school, and low scores indicate that students are involved and interested in school.
On average, students had high perceptions of the value of school, made reasonable efforts in persisting with their schoolwork, reported low behaviours in terms of self-sabotage (e.g., wasting time before a test in order to have a reason for not doing well), and were low on disengagement at school (see Figure 4 and Table 6).

On average, results in 2010 indicated slightly (and significantly) lower scores related to the value of schooling and persisting with their schoolwork. Furthermore, results in 2010 revealed a slightly (and significantly) higher involvement in self-sabotage, and disengagement at school in comparison to the results of 2009.

On average, results for students in 2011 indicated similar or slightly higher scores relating to the value for schooling and persisting with schoolwork. Results in 2011 also revealed a similar rate of disengagement at school and slightly reduced involvement in self sabotage compared to 2010. These results mean that the positive motivational attitudes (value of schooling) and behaviours (persistence) remained stable across 2010 and 2011, whereas the negative behaviour of self sabotage decreased but disengagement (disinterest) from 2009 to 2010 increased.
Table 6: Student Motivation at School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value of Schooling</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Sabotage</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Female and Male Motivation at School

On average, females persisted with challenging schoolwork slightly more than males, and males were slightly higher on their use of self-sabotage than females (see Figure 5 and Table 7). In addition, male and female students had similar views on the importance of school, and were similarly low on disengagement.

All SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
On average, both males and females showed slightly lower scores in relation to the value of schooling and persisting with their schoolwork in 2010 compared to 2009. In addition, both male and female results in 2010 revealed a slightly higher involvement in self-sabotage, and disengagement at school in comparison to the male and female results from 2009.

All SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
On average males and females showed similar or slightly lower scores in relation to the value of schooling and persisting with schoolwork in 2011 compared to 2010. Both male and female results in 2011 revealed similar disengagement with school as in 2010. Female students were less involved in self sabotage than in 2010 or than males.
Table 7: Female and Male Motivation at School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of Schooling</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Sabotage</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>1.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>2.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student Motivation at School by Year Group

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, Year 7 students made slightly higher efforts in persisting with their schoolwork than Year 8 and 9 students. In addition, all year groups had similar perceptions of school value, similar tendencies to self-sabotage their schoolwork, and were similarly low on disengagement (see Figure 6 and Table 8).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
On average, Year 8 students had higher views on the importance of school and persisted with challenging school work slightly more than Year 9 and 10 students. Year 8 students were also slightly lower on their use of self-sabotage than Year 9 and 10 students. In addition, all year groups in 2010 had consistently shown a declining trend in the value of schooling and likelihood to persist with challenging schoolwork when compared to all year groups in 2009. All year groups in 2010 were also slightly higher on their use of self-sabotage, and felt more disengaged than all year groups in 2009.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
On average, each group of Year 9, 10 and 11 had a similarly elevated view about the value of schooling and persisted with challenging schoolwork. They were similarly lower on disengagement and the tendency to self sabotage. Over time, students have shown a slightly declining trend in their attitudes to the value of schooling, and their persistence in schoolwork. They have also shown a declining tendency to self sabotage, but also a gradually increasing tendency to be disengaged.
Table 8: Student Motivation by Year Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>2009 (Year)</th>
<th>2010 (Year)</th>
<th>2011 (Year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value of Schooling</td>
<td>4.35 4.27</td>
<td>4.24 3.75</td>
<td>3.59 3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>3.75 3.59</td>
<td>3.59 3.52</td>
<td>3.43 3.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Sabotage</td>
<td>1.96 2.09</td>
<td>2.03 2.05</td>
<td>2.12 1.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>1.79 1.91</td>
<td>1.96 2.01</td>
<td>2.10 2.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Self-Concept

This section details students’ perceptions of themselves in various academic areas. How they view themselves in various academic areas at school can impact on their motivation and engagement to participate in schoolwork.
Description of Self-Concept Terms

Three areas of schooling self-concept were assessed within the Staying On questionnaire (see Table 1). These were:
1. Math;
2. English; and
3. School Affect.
All areas of self-concept were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = completely disagree, to 5 = completely agree.

MATH
Maths self-concept measures students’ perceptions of their ability in maths classes at school. Questions include:
- I get good marks in maths classes
- I learn things quickly in maths
- I have always done well in maths
High scores represent that students consider their abilities in math to be quite good, and low scores represent that students consider their abilities in math to be quite poor.

ENGLISH
English self-concept measures students’ perceptions of their ability in English classes at school. Questions include:
- I am good at English
- I learn things quickly in English
- Work in English classes is easy for me
High scores represent that students consider their abilities in English to be quite good, and low scores represent that students consider their abilities in English to be quite poor.

SCHOOL AFFECT
School Affect self-concept measures student enjoyment of school. Questions include:
- I look forward to most lessons in school
- I like going to school
- Going to classes in mostly enjoyable
High scores represent that students enjoy going to school, and low scores represent that students do not enjoy going to school.
Average Student Self-Concept in Various School Areas

Figure 7. Average Students Self-Concept.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, students had reasonable perceptions of their abilities in math and English schoolwork, and enjoyed going to school (see Figure 7 and Table 9).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
A slightly (and significantly) lower average of student self concept was found over time when comparing students across 2009 and 2010. On average, students in 2010 had significantly lower perception of themselves in their math ability, English ability and enjoyment of school than students in 2009.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
Students had a slightly lower self concept in maths compared to both 2009 and 2010, while their self concept in English remained consistent with that in 2010. Students in 2011 had a similar enjoyment of school to that in 2010.

Table 9: Student Self-Concept

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Concept</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Affect</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Female and Male Self-Concept in Various School Areas

Female and Male Self-Concept

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, males had slightly higher perceptions of their abilities in math work at school than females, and females had slightly higher perceptions of their abilities in English work at school than males. Males and females had similar perceptions of enjoyment of school (see Figure 8 and Table 10).

All SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
On average, both males and females in 2010 had slightly lower perceptions of themselves in their math ability, English ability and school affect (enjoyment at school) when compared to 2009. Furthermore, males indicated a slightly higher perception of their ability in math, and females indicated a slightly higher perception of their ability in English.

All SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
On average, males had a higher perception of their abilities in maths work than females. In English, females had a slightly higher perception about their abilities than males and these perceptions were similarly consistent for 2009-11. Males and females had similar self concept to that in 2010.
### Table 10: Student Self-Concept

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Concept</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>3.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Affect</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Year Group Self-Concept Differences in Various School Areas

On average, Year 7 students had slightly higher perceptions of their school affect (enjoyment of school) than Year 8 and 9 students, and all year groups had similar perceptions of their abilities in math and English schoolwork (see Figure 9 and Table 11).

All SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, Year 7 students had slightly higher perceptions of their school affect (enjoyment of school) than Year 8 and 9 students, and all year groups had similar perceptions of their abilities in math and English schoolwork (see Figure 9 and Table 11).

All SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
One year on, most students’ perceptions of their math ability, English ability and school affect (enjoyment of school) were somewhat lower than in 2009. Year 8 students in 2010 had slightly higher perceptions of their ability in maths; English and school affect in comparison to students in Years 9 and 10, in 2010.

All SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
In 2011, most students’ perceptions of their maths ability was lower, whilst Year 9 and Year 11 students had similar or higher perceptions about their ability in English. Year10 students had a slightly lower (but significant) perception about their English ability. Year10 students in 2011 also showed a slightly lower enjoyment of school than year 9 or Year 11. Overall, the results show a gradual decline in maths self concept, maintenance of English self concept and a small decline in students’ enjoyment of school from Year 7 to 11 between 2009 and 2011.
Table 11: Student Self-Concept

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Concept</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2009 (Year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Social Relational Support for Education

This section details students’ feelings of inclusion in their school, their affiliation to their school, parental support for school, having friends at school, and having their views listened to by staff at school.
Description of Terms for Social Relational Support for Education

Five areas of social relational support for education were assessed within the Staying On questionnaire (see Table 1). These were:

1. Perceived parental support for education;
2. Teacher respect at school;
3. Value coherence;
4. Belonging at school; and
5. Friends at school.

All areas were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = completely disagree, to 5 = completely agree.

PERCEIVED PARENTAL SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

Perceived parental support for education measures students’ perceptions of whether their parents care about their education. Questions include:

- My parents/guardians would really like me to finish Year 12
- Doing well at school is something my parents take seriously

High scores represent that students believe their parents care about their education and schooling, and low scores represent that students believe their parents do not care about their education and schooling.

TEACHER RESPECT AT SCHOOL

Teacher respect at school measures students’ perception of whether staff take account of student opinions at school. Questions include:

- Staff care about the student opinions in my school
- Students’ views and needs are considered when decisions are made at this school

High scores represent that students believe staff are concerned about their views, and low scores represent that students do not believe staff are concerned about their views.

VALUE COHERENCE

Value coherence measures how connected students feel to their school and whether they believe their friends care about school. Questions include:

- I feel proud to be a student in this school
- Most of my friends care about doing well at school

High scores indicate that students feel affiliated with their school and believe their friends also care about school, and low scores indicate that students feel disconnected from their school and believe their friends do not care about school.
BELONGING AT SCHOOL
This measures students’ feelings of affiliation or belonging to their school. Questions include:
- I feel lonely at this school
- I often feel like an outside (or left out of things) at my school
Please note: some questions were reverse coded, so that high scores indicate that students feel included at their school, and low scores represent that students do not feel included as part of the school community.

FRIENDS AT SCHOOL
Friends at school measures students’ perceptions of their likeability by peers at their school. Questions include:
- I make friends easily at school
- Other students seem to like me
High scores indicate that students feel they are well liked and have friends at school, and low scores indicate that students feel they not as well liked.
“A slightly lower average of social relational support for education was found over time when comparing student responses between 2009 and 2011”
On average, students felt strongly that their parents supported their education, felt a sense of belonging at school, and felt they had friends at school. Students also felt less strongly (although positively) about their (and their peers) support for education, and that the staff showed concern for students’ views (see Figure 10 and Table 12).

A slightly (and significantly) lower average level of social relational support for education (except belonging at school) was found over time when comparing student responses across 2009 and 2010. On average, in 2010, students’ perceptions regarding parental support for education, teacher respect at school, having friends at school, and their Value coherence were significantly lower. Scores for belonging at school remained the same across 2009-2010.

Students reported in 2011 that they experienced only slightly higher relational support compared to 2010. Feelings of relational support remained slightly (but significantly) lower than that experienced in 2009. Students reported consistently between 2009 and 2011 that they felt a sense of belonging at their school.
Table 12: Student Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Support</th>
<th>Relational</th>
<th>Average 2009</th>
<th>Average 2010</th>
<th>Average 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental Support</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Respect</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Coherence</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belong at School</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends at School</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On average, females showed slightly higher scores on Value coherence, and believed more strongly that staff showed concern for students’ views than males (see Figure 11 and Table 13). Males and females had similar views on their feelings of belonging at school, friends at school, and that their parents supported their education.

On average, both the 2010 male and female results revealed slightly lower perceptions across all areas of social relational support for education, when compared to the results for 2009. On average, females perceived stronger parental support for their education, and believed more strongly that staff showed concern for students’ views than males. Males and females had similar views on their feelings of belonging at school, and friends at school.

On average females showed slightly higher scores on social relational support at school. Females believed in particular that their parents supported their education that teachers showed respect and that they had more friendly relationships at school than did the males.
Table 13: Female and Male Student Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Support</th>
<th>Relational</th>
<th>Average 2009</th>
<th>Average 2010</th>
<th>Average 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Support</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Respect</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Coherence</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belong at School</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends at School</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Social Relational Support for Education by Year Group

![Graph showing Year 7 to Year 11 Perceptions of Social Relational Support for Education](image)

**Figure 12. Average Student Engagement by Year Group.**

**ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)**
On average, Year 7 students felt a slightly higher Value coherence, and also felt that staff showed concern for students rights and views more strongly than Year 8 or 9 students (see Figure 12 and Table 14). In addition, Years 7, 8, and 9 students had similar views on their feelings of belonging at school, and that their parents supported their education.

**ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)**
All year groups in 2010 revealed slightly lower perceptions of social relational support for education. Interestingly, similar patterns of results were found in 2010 as in 2009. For example, teacher respect at school was perceived least positively, followed by value coherence and belonging at school, whilst perceived parental support was perceived most positively.

**ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)**
All year groups in 2011 revealed similar or slightly lower perceptions of social relational support for education than in 2010. All year groups continued to indicate that teacher respect was the least positively perceived of the relational support indicators and that parental support was most positively perceived.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Support</th>
<th>Relational Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2009 (Year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Support</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Respect</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Coherence</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belong at School</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends at School</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This section details student’s responses to questions about skipping class, arriving late to school, and missing days of school. This can be potentially detrimental to student engagement at school.

This data was collected in relation to how many times students had skipped class, arrived late, or missed a day of school within two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire.
“Students were more likely to arrive late for school and miss a day of school in 2011 than 2009 or 2010”
Skipping Classes, Arriving Late, and Missing Days of School

Percentage of students who skipped class, arrived late for school, or missed a day of school within two weeks prior to taking part in the questionnaire

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, less than 10% of students’ skipped class, 20% arrived late for school, and almost 40% missed a day of school within two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire (see Figure 13 and Table 15).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
Students were slightly more likely to arrive late for school and miss a day of school in 2010 than 2009. In 2010, approximately 10% of students’ skipped class, 27% arrived late for school, and almost 39% missed a day of school within two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
In general, students were more likely to miss a day of school or be late to school in 2011 than they were in 2009. In 2011, 28% arrived late to school whilst 40% missed a day of school within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire.

Figure 13. Skipping Class, Arriving Late, and Missing Days of School.
Table 15: Skipping Class, Arriving Late, and Missing Days of School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skipping School</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skipped Class</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrived Late for School</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missed a Day of School</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“In general, students were more likely to miss a day of school or be late to school in 2011 than they were in 2009.”
Frequency of Skipping Class

Percentage of students who skipped class and how often they skipped class within two weeks prior to taking part in the questionnaire

Figure 14. Frequency of Students’ Skipping Class.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, approximately 5% of students had skipped class once or twice within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire (see Figure 14 and Table 16).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
Similar results were found across the data between 2009 and 2010. On average, approximately 2% of students had skipped class five times or more within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire.

All SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
Data remained similar between 2009 and 2011. Approximately 5% of students missed a day of school in the two weeks prior to participating in the Staying On questionnaire, whilst approximately 2% had missed school three or four times.
Table 16: Frequency of Students Skipping Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Skipping Class</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three times</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four times</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five or more times</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Differences between Female and Male Students Skipping Class

Percentage of females and males who skipped class within two weeks prior to taking part in the questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On average, males and females were equally as likely to skip class as each other. Approximately 10% of females and males skipped class within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire (see Figure 15 and Table 17).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
On average, females and males across 2009 and 2010 were equally as likely to skip class as each other within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire.

All SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
On average males and females were equally as likely to skip class as each other in 2009-2011.
### Table 17: Differences in Percentage between Female and Male Students Skipping Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Skipping</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Differences between Year Groups in Skipping Classes

Percentage of Year 7 to 11 students who skipped class within two weeks prior to taking part in the questionnaire

Figure 16. Differences in Percentage Between Years 7, 8, and 9 Students Skipping Class.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, skipping class increased incrementally from Year 7 to Year 9, with Year 7 students least likely to have skipped class, and Year 9 students most likely to report they had skipped class within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire (see Figure 16 and Table 18).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
On average, skipping class increased incrementally from Year 7 to 10 when comparing the 2009 and 2010 student data. Year 8 students were equally as likely to skip class in 2009 as Year 8 students in 2010, and Year 9 students were equally as likely to skip class in 2009 as Year 9 students in 2010. In particular, students in year 10 revealed a slightly higher percentage of skipping class when compared to all school results in years 7 to 9.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
In 2011 students in Year 10 and Year 11 skipped class more frequently than those in Year 9. Students in Year 11 reported skipping class more frequently than any other year group. It therefore appears that skipping class increases as students move through the schooling years when looking at the results from 2009 to 2011.
### Table 18: Differences between Year Groups in Skipping Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Skipping Class</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“The percentages of students arriving late have, in general increased in 2011. Results were most noticeable for Year 11 students”
On average, over 10% of students reported they had arrived late once within
the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire (see Figure
17 and Table 19).

Results were comparable across 2009 and 2010 for arriving late to school,
however 2% more of students arrived late for school on two occasions in 2010
than 2009.

In 2011, an increased percentage of students reported they had arrived late
to school once and three times within the two weeks prior to taking part in
the Staying On questionnaire compared to 2009 and 2010. However there
was a decreased percentage of students who were absent five or more
times compared to 2009 and 2010.
Table 19: Frequency of Students Arriving Late for School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Arriving Late</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three times</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four times</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five or more times</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Differences between Female and Male Students Arriving Late

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, slightly more males reported they had arrived late for school than females within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire (see Figure 18 and Table 20).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
Similar results were found when comparing differences between males and females across 2009 and 2010. Overall, slightly more males reported they had arrived late for school than females within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire. In addition, in 2010, slightly more males and females reported arriving late to school when compared to 2009.

All SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
Slightly more females than males reported they had arrived late for school in 2011. The percentage of females arriving late had increased in both 2011 and 2010 and was greater than the increase in the percentage of males arriving late.
Table 20: Differences in Percentage between Female and Male Students Arriving Late for School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Arriving Late</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Differences between Year Groups in Arriving Late

Figure 19. Differences in Percentage Between Years 7, 8, and 9 Students Arriving Late for School.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, arriving late for school increased incrementally from Year 7 to Year 9, with Year 7 students least likely to have arrived late for school, and Year 9 students most likely to report they had arrived late for school within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire (see Figure 19 and Table 21).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
A similar pattern of results was found when comparing students who arrived late across 2009 and 2010. On average, there was a slight increase in arriving late for school in 2010 across Years 8 to 10. A greater percentage of Year 10 students reported they had arrived late for school within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire than any other year group.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
The pattern of results for students who arrived late at school in 2011 showed that Year 11 students had a significantly higher percentage (34%) compared to Year 9 and Year10 students (25% and 27% respectively)
### Table 21: Differences between Year Groups in Arriving Late for School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Arriving Late</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“More than 20% of students missed one day of school within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire in each year of the study 2009-2011”
Frequency of Missing a Day of School

Percentage of students who missed a day of school and how often they were missed a day within two weeks prior to taking part in the questionnaire

![Bar chart showing frequency of missing a day of school for 2009, 2010, and 2011.]

Figure 20. Frequency of Students Missing a Day of School.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, over 20% of students missed one day of school within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire (see Figure 20 and Table 22).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
Results showed almost equal outcomes when comparing data across 2009 and 2010. On average, approximately 20% of students reported having missed one day of school within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire. A smaller proportion missed two or more days.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
On average, 23% of students reported having missed one day of school in 2011 prior to having taken part in the Staying on questionnaire. This was a slight percentage increase compared to 2009-10.

Table 22: Frequency of Students Missing a Day of School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Missing a Day</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three times</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four times</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five or more times</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Differences between Females and Males Missing a Day

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, male and female students were equally as likely to miss a day of school as each other. Over 35% of females and males missed a day of school within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire (see Figure 21 and Table 23).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
Results were almost equal for across 2009 and 2010. Results indicated no gender differences between females and males who reported missing a day of school within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
The percentage of females who missed a day of school increased more noticeably from 2009-2011 from 36% to 41% whilst the percentage increase for males who missed a day was from 38% to 39%.
Table 23: Differences in Percentage between Female and Male Students Missing a Day of School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Missing a Day</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Differences between Year Groups in Missing a Day

Figure 22. Differences in Percentage Between Years 7, 8, and 9 Students Missing a Day of School.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, a similar percentage of students from each year group had missed a day of school within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire (see Figure 22 and Table 24).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
Whilst a consistent equal trend was found for Years 7 to 9 students who had missed a day of school in 2009, a decreasing, but higher trend was found across the 2010 student data. In 2010 the results revealed a slight decrease from Year 8 to 10, although this was higher than all results for 2009. This ranged from the highest point in Year 8 with over 40% of students missing a day of school within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
The decreasing but higher trend for students in Years 9-11 missing a day of school continued in 2011. Year 9 students had the highest percentage of students who had missed a day of school of any year group between 2009 and 2011 at 40%.
Table 24: Differences between Year Groups in Missing a Day of School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Missing a Day</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reasons for Missing a Day of School

Percentage of students who missed a day of school due to sickness

Figure 23a. Students who Missed a Day of School due to illness.

Other reasons for why students missed school

Figure 23b. Other Reasons for Missing a Day of School.
Reasons for Missing a Day of School

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
Of the students who had missed a day of school, almost 30% had missed a
day of school due to sickness within the two weeks prior to taking part in the
Staying On questionnaire (see Figure 23a, Figure 23b, and Table 25).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
Similar results were found across 2009 and 2010. The majority of students
missed a day due to illness, followed by being on holidays and looking after a
family member within the two weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On
questionnaire.

All SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
In 2011, the majority of students missed a day of school due to illness. This was
followed by being on holidays and looking after a family member in the two
weeks prior to taking part in the Staying On questionnaire. The percentage
missing a day due to illness in 2011 was slightly higher at 32% than 2009-10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Reasons</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sick</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking after family member</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Farm or Business</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagged</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspended</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Female and Male Reasons for Missing a Day of School

Figure 24a. Females and Males who Missed a Day of School due to illness.

Figure 24b. Other Reasons for Missing a Day of School.
ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, a similar percentage of males and females responded to each reason for why they had missed school. A slightly higher percentage of females reported they had missed a day of school due to sickness than males, and a slightly higher percentage of males reported they had missed a day of school due to looking after a family member, being involved in the family business or running the family farm, and wagging school than females (see Figure 24a, Figure 24b, and Table 26).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
Similar results were found for males and females for how they responded to each reason why they missed school in 2009 and 2010. A slightly lower percentage of males reported they had missed a day of school due to illness in 2010. However, a slightly higher percentage of males in 2010 reported they had missed a day of school due to being on holiday, and working, than the average across 2009.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
In 2011, a slightly lower percentage of males reported that they had missed a day of school due to illness than females. Males had a slightly higher percentage than females in 2011 for missing school due to working or helping in a family business.

Table 26: Differences in Percentage Between Female and Male Students Missing a Day of School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Reasons</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sick</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking after family member</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Farm or Business</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagged</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspended</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Year Group Reasons for Missing School a Day of School

Percentage of Year 7 to 11 students missing school due to illness

Other reasons for why Year 7 to Year 11 students missed school

Figure 25a. Student Reasons for Missing a Day of School.

Figure 25b. Student Reasons for Missing a Day of School.
ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2009 (ORANGE COLUMN)
On average, a similar percentage of Year 7, 8, and 9 students responded to each reason for why they had missed school. A slightly higher percentage of Year 7 students reported they had missing a day of school due to sickness than Year 8 and 9 students, a slightly higher percentage of Year 8 students missed a day due to being involved in the family business or running the family farm, and a slightly higher percentage of Year 9 students missed a day due to wagging school (see Figure 25a, Figure 25b, and Table 27).

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2010 (PURPLE COLUMN)
Similar results were found across year groups for how students' responded to each reason why they missed school during 2009 and 2010. Interestingly, Year 7 students from 2009 reported the highest percentage for missing a day of school due to illness in comparison to all other year groups. Furthermore, the Year 9 cohort in 2010 were the most likely to have missed a day of school due to going on holiday.

ALL SCHOOLS DATA 2011 (GREEN COLUMN)
Similar results were found across year groups for how students' responded to each reason why they missed school during 2009-2011. The Year 11 cohort were the most likely of any year group to indicate that they had missed school due to going on holidays in 2011.

Table 27: Differences between Year Groups in Missing a Day of School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage Reasons</th>
<th>2009 (Year)</th>
<th>2010 (Year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sick</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking after family member</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Business or Farm</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagged</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspended</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 27: Differences between Year Groups in Missing a Day of School

2014 Staying On at School Report
Section 4: Research Results and Ongoing Analyses
SECTION 4
Research results and on-going analyses

The Staying On project resulted in the collection of a substantial amount of both qualitative and quantitative data. Some of these data have been used to generate products that are complete and have already been published. All of these data have contributed to our presentations to schools, to DEC Regional conferences, and to national conferences. These presentations are listed in Section 5, alongside copies of published papers and chapters.

In this Section, some of the quantitative, mixed method and qualitative data analyses that we have conducted are provided. Some of the results presented here have already been published. There are other results that are indicative: they are offered as evidence of work in progress. The first part of Section 4 describes the processes of construct validation associated with the surveys used in this research. It includes a section on the validation of the Social Relational Support for Education scale that is a new product developed by the Staying On research team. This section also reports inferential analyses that indicate how 'above expectation' schools differ from 'as expected' schools, and how the various factors measured in this research inter-relate. The second part describes an on-going mixed method study in which student interviews are analysed longitudinally, in relation to whether they became more engaged or less engaged over time. The third part reports on a thematic approach to the analyses of student interviews, identifying issues that affect student satisfaction with school. The final part of this Section presents three short case studies of schools that have been performing above expectation over the period of our research.

4.1 Quantitative aspects of the Staying On project

4.1.1 Psychometrics: Construct Validation

Before using an instrument to make comparisons between groups or to examine the influence of predictor variables on outcome variables, it is important to first validate the instrument such that the results can be trusted to reflect actual differences. There are various ways to validate an instrument. The first step is usually a test of internal consistency of each scale using Cronbach’s alpha reliability estimate which has a generally accepted target value of .70 (Garson, 2005; Lewicki & Hill, 2006). In the present study, in addition to traditional reliability tests of internal consistency of each scale, the state-of-the-art confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) approach to construct validation was applied. CFA procedures have been described elsewhere (Bollen, 1989; Byrne, 1998, 2012; Marsh, 1994; Marsh, Hau, Baumert, & Peschar, 2009; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993; Vandenberg & Lance, 2000), and they are therefore not detailed here.

In brief, CFAs were conducted with MPlus 5.21 (Muthén & Muthén, 2006) using maximum likelihood estimation. In a CFA study, the parameters typically consist of factor loadings, factor variances and covariances, and measured variable uniquenesses (i.e., measurement errors
associated with each item). In accordance with standard practice in multigroup analyses, covariance matrices were used as input (Kline, 1998; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). The major purpose was to first test the extent to which the proposed model fitted the data from the sample, and then observe whether the relationships between factors were reasonable and logical. Given that Staying On project is longitudinal, it was important to determine whether the instruments were a reliable and valid measure across each of the three waves of data.

Both absolute fit statistics and incremental fit statistics were utilised to evaluate the model fit (see Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2010; Hoyle & Painter, 1995; Tanaka, 1993). The absolute fit statistics included the $\chi^2$ test of exact model fit, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Browne & Cudeck, 1993). The incremental fit statistics (Hoyle & Painter, 1995) included the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; Bentler, 1990) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI; Tucker & Lewis, 1973), also known as the non-normed fit index (NNFI; Benter & Bonett, 1980). For fit indices, in general, the CFI and TLI vary along a 0 to 1 continuum in which values equal to or greater than .90 and .95 are typically taken to reflect acceptable and excellent fits to the data, respectively. According to Browne and Cudeck (1993), RMSEA values in the vicinity of .05 indicate ‘close fit’, values near .08 indicate ‘fair fit’, and values above .10 indicate ‘poor fit’. Those scales that passed the CFA validation procedure would be used in subsequent analyses.

Construct Validation Results

Across the themed parts of the questionnaire, scales from pre-existing instruments were utilised and there were newly developed items and scales included in the survey. Table 4.1 lists the scales and sample items included for analyses in this study. The newly developed scales appeared in Part 5 of the questionnaire whereas the scales selected for the remaining parts of the survey were drawn from pre-existing instruments.

Analyses proceeded with construct validity of the instruments comprised in the core parts of the questionnaire. For instance Part 3 comprised scales from Martin’s Student Motivation and Engagement Scale (SMES), Part 4 comprised scales from Marsh’s the Self-description Questionnaire and Part 5 comprised newly developed scales. The results from the first wave of data comprising 1966 students across all three NSW regions who took part in the study in 2009 from Years 7 through 9 revealed that the alpha reliability estimate for each scale was acceptable, and was higher than the target reliability of at least .70 (Garson, 2005; Lewicki & Hill, 2006). Specifically, the Part 3 CFA model tested the ability of the four factors (Value of Schooling; Persistence; Self-sabotage; Disengagement) to explain the relationship among the specified items. We posited a highly restrictive a priori model such that each item was allowed to load on one and only one factor (all other factor loadings were constrained to be zero) and the uniqueness term (i.e., measurement error associated with each item) was not allowed to correlate with uniqueness terms for any other item. This model with the items positing four motivation and engagement factors provided a good fit to the data. The thresholds for both absolute and incremental fit were above .90 and the RMSEA was less than .05. These results provided confidence in pursuing further analyses since the instruments were demonstrated to be reliable and valid.

Table 4.1: Questionnaire scales and sample items

<p>| Part 3 – Motivation and Learning: Sample items drawn from the Motivation and Engagement Scale | 107 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Value of schooling</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most of my friends like this school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to classes is mostly enjoyable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Persistence</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If I can’t understand my schoolwork, I keep trying until I do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If my homework is difficult, I keep working at it trying to figure it out</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Self-sabotage/self-handicapping</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes I don’t try hard at school so I can have a reason if I don’t do well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I don’t work hard, I have an excuse if I do badly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Disengagement</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Each week I’m trying less and less at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t really care about school anymore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part 4 – Self Confidence at School:** Sample items drawn from the Self-Description Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Math Self-concept</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I get good marks in MATHS classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learn things quickly in MATHS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>English Self-concept</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am good at ENGLISH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work in ENGLISH classes is easy for me</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>School Self-concept of Affect</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I look forward to most lessons in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to classes is mostly enjoyable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part 5 – How I Feel About School:** Sample items were adapted from pre-existing instruments as well as items being newly developed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Belonging at School</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In school I often feel &quot;put down&quot; by other students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often feel like an outsider (or left out of things) at my school (came from inclusion)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Value Coherence</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel proud to be a student in this school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of my friends like this school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Parent Support of Education</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My parents/guardians would really like me to finish Year 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My parents/guardians think that if I do well at school it will improve my chances in life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Teacher Respect</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff at my school show concern for students’ rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff members at my school ask students for their ideas on how things could be improved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlations among the dependent variables**

CFA provides output to examine correlations among the factors. Factor correlations reveal information about predictive relationships. Since socio-economic status (SES) has been shown to be a strong predictor of students’ school engagement, we examined how parents’ occupations and education are related (see Table 4.2) and then we examined their relationship to the dependent variables (see Table 4.3). The highest correlation between mothers’ and fathers’ occupation and education was between mothers’ education and fathers’ education (at .48). The correlations between mothers’ occupation and their education was also high (.38), as was fathers’ occupation and their education (.29). Although significant, the correlation between (a)
mothers’ occupation and fathers’ occupation, (b) mothers occupation and fathers education, and (c) fathers occupation and mothers education are low (between .150 and .180).

Table 4.2: Correlations amongst Parent Occupations and Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mothers Occupation</th>
<th>Fathers Occupation</th>
<th>Mothers Highest Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mothers Occupation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers Occupation</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers Highest Level of Education</td>
<td>-0.38</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers Highest Level of Education</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We examined how students’ feelings towards school were related to socio-economic status measured through parents’ employment and education (Table 4.3). The correlations of occupation and education variables were different for each outcome variables (e.g., motivation, self-concept, disengagement). Mothers’ occupation correlated significantly (but these were low) with self-sabotage (.12), math self-concept (-.05), and English self-concept (-.12). Fathers’ occupation correlated significantly (but these were low) with disengagement (.06), persistence with challenging schoolwork (.08), self-sabotage (.14), math self-concept (-.10), English self-concept (-.11), school affect self-concept (-.07), value coherence (-.10), parent support for education (-.06), and teacher respect (-.08). Mothers’ and fathers’ education were correlated significantly (but these were low) with all variables (disengagement, value of schooling, persistence, self-sabotage, math, English and school affect, school belonging, value coherence, parent support for education, and teacher respect ranging from .06 to .17).

Overall these results suggest that fathers’ occupation was related to the outcome variables more than mothers’ occupation, but education (of both mothers and fathers) correlated with more outcome variables (and the correlations were generally higher) than either parents’ occupation. It seems that parents’ education has more to do with how students’ feel about school than the jobs their parents have.

Most notably from the relationships from Wave 1 reported in Table 4.3 is that students who identified with being disengaged at school were significantly more likely to report lower levels of valuing school, less like to persist in the face of a challenge but instead are more likely to self-sabotage and place obstacles in their way. They report low maths and English self-concepts and dislike school. They have a poor sense of belong at school and are less likely to believe that their teachers respect them. These results are suggestive that disengagement with school affects important educational values, relationships and self-beliefs. In relation to socio-economic status (SES), the higher the disengaged, the lower the level of education their parents have (-.09 and -.08, mothers and fathers respectively), and the less skilled their fathers’ occupation is (.06). The SES results need to be cautiously interpreted given that the correlations were relatively weak. Based on correlational data schools could emphasise the importance of parents investing in lifelong learning through encouraging and supporting further education for the parents to pursue. Schools need to consider how they can bolster students’ school affect and sense of
belonging since these two dependent variables play an important role in how students feel about school and influence how engaged they are.

Table 4.3: Correlations amongst the Dependent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>-0.55</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>-0.55</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.51</td>
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<td>-</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<td>0.37</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>-0.64</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>-0.58</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
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<td>0.47</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.38</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Construct Validation: Social-Relational Support for Education (SRSE) Scale

Despite three decades of research extensively mapping the relationships between disengagement from school and demographic, institutional, and individual factors that contribute to it, less is known about the social process that contributes to the departure from school early. Ream and Rumberger (2008) acknowledge this deficit when they state that “some aspects of the survey research literature remain understudied—particularly the social aspects of the process that causes young people to leave school before they obtain their high school diplomas” (p.110). By focusing specifically on relationships students’ have with significant others including parents, teachers and peers, the new Social-Relational Support for Education (SRSE) scale provides the opportunity for future research to investigate what it is about these relationships that renders young people from low Socio-Economic Status communities liable to disengage and influence their decisions to either stay or leave school early.
The newly developed SRSE contains five constructs: Perceived Parental Support for Education, Teacher Respect at School, Value Coherence, Belonging at School, and Friends at School. Items for each of these factors were included in the study because they are predicted to interact over time and contribute to the changing levels of student engagement and participation, ultimately leading young people to drop out, or stay on, at school. The literature review located in Section 5 (i.e., paper published in the Australian Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology) provides a detailed rationale for the inclusion of each of the constructs and their influence on engagement. In total, 25 items were developed for the original SRSE. Table 4.4 provides sample items from the scales (factors). All items were measured on a five-point Likert response scale (1 = Completely Disagree, 2 = Mostly Disagree, 3 = Sometimes Agree, Sometimes Disagree, 4 = Mostly Agree, 5 = Completely Agree). The results testing the instrument reliability and validity for the first wave of data revealed that the alpha reliability estimate for each scale was acceptable, and was higher than the target reliability of at least .70 (Garson, 2005; Lewicki & Hill, 2006). The CFA model with the items positing five factors provided a good fit to the data. The thresholds for both absolute and incremental fit were above .90 and the RMSEA was less than .05. The instrument was subsequently tested with a longitudinal CFA using all three data waves and these results also provided good incremental and absolute fit indices (see Table 4.5). Furthermore, invariance testing supported the structural integrity of the SRSE model as invariant across sex, year and sex by year groups. These results provided confidence in pursuing further analyses since the instruments were demonstrated to be reliable and valid.

Table 4.4: Sample items and their related scale for the SRSE model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My parents/guardians would really like me to finish Year 12</td>
<td>PARENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My parents/guardians think that if I do well at school it will improve my chances in life</td>
<td>PARENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing well at school is something my parents take seriously</td>
<td>PARENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My parents/guardians think doing well in school is an important basis for success in later life</td>
<td>PARENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My parents/guardians think that if I complete Year 12 it will be good for my career</td>
<td>PARENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my school, staff members invite students to raise their concerns or problems</td>
<td>TEACH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff members at my school ask students for their ideas on how things could be improved</td>
<td>TEACH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of my teachers really listen to what I have to say</td>
<td>TEACH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff care about the student opinions in my school</td>
<td>TEACH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ views and needs are considered when decisions are made at this school</td>
<td>TEACH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff apologise to us if they make mistakes</td>
<td>TEACH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I make friends easily at my school</td>
<td>FRNDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other students seem to like me</td>
<td>FRNDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have lots of friends at this school</td>
<td>FRNDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel lonely at this school</td>
<td>BELONG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At school I feel awkward and out of place</td>
<td>BELONG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In school I often feel “put down” by other students</td>
<td>BELONG</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I often feel like an outsider (or left out of things) at my school | BELONG
I don't feel safe at this school | BELONG
Most of my friends like this school | VALUECO
Going to classes is mostly enjoyable | VALUECO
I feel proud to be a student in this school | VALUECO
I do not want to go to school anymore | VALUECO
I often feel bored at this school | VALUECO
Most of my friends care about doing well at school | VALUECO

Table 4.5: Longitudinal CFA results for the SRSE scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>TLI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CFA</td>
<td>8299.004</td>
<td>1287</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>.959</td>
<td>.954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFA: Factor Loading invariance</td>
<td>8472.115</td>
<td>1151</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>.959</td>
<td>.954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFA: Factor loading; intercept invariance</td>
<td>8948.094</td>
<td>1016</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.952</td>
<td>.948</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The newly developed SRSE scale is an important innovation stemming from this study because it recognises the significance of social-relational support for education. In relation to parents, while past studies have emphasised parental participation in school activities, recent research suggests that students’ perceptions of parental support play a more salient role in predicting students’ own academic values (Gniewosz & Noack, 2012). Students’ perceptions of the way their teachers treat them also appear to have substantial cumulative effects on their motivation and engagement (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Vallerand et al., 1997). A sense of belonging at school and having friends at school are both closely related factors impinging on student engagement (Juvonen, 2007; Kim et al., 2011; McGaha & Fitzpatrick, 2005). And lastly, the Value Coherence factor is an innovation designed to measure the ways in which individual students’ own engagement (or their disengagement) might be related to and supported by the engagement (or disengagement) of the friends with whom they associate.

Interventions designed to enhance student engagement and high school completion need to be based on issues that are amenable to change, such as changes in the ways parents and teachers relate to students and what they say to them, or how students relate to their peers and the values they share. Thus, the longer-term goal is to understand the ways such social contextual factors might influence students’ approaches to their schoolwork (cognitive engagement), their feelings about school (emotional engagement), and their attitudes to school participation and attendance (behavioural engagement). The SRSE scale provides an essential foundation that will support an exploration of these issues.

4.1.2 Inferential Statistics

Inferential statistics were utilised to explicate what factors are instrumental to completing school and how these differed or not for various groups.

Difference between regions
Examining descriptive statistics across the Regions showed that Regions 1 and 2 performed similarly across the dependant variables whereas Region 3 was lower across most of the positive factors (e.g. persistence, value coherence) and higher in the negative factors (e.g. disengagement & self-sabotage) (see Table 4.6). Analysis of Variance (see Table 4.7) revealed highly significant differences between Regions 1 and 2 with Region 3 for Value of Schooling, Persistence, School Affect, and Parental Support for Education.

Table 4.6: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Region 1, Region 2, and Region 3 Schools on Dependent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variables</th>
<th>Region 1</th>
<th>Region 2</th>
<th>Region 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Of Schooling</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Sabotage</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math Self-Concept</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>3.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Self-Concept</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>3.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Affect</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging at School</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>4.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Coherence</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>3.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Support for Education</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Respect at School</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Region 1 \(n=738\), Region 2 \(n=665\), Region 3 \(n=563\)

Table 4.7: One-way ANOVA between Region 1, Region 2, and Region 3 Schools on Dependent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variables</th>
<th>SS Between</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value Of Schooling</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>3.40*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>816.86</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>819.68</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>7.38</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>4.94**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1466.20</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1473.58</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Sabotage</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1398.52</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1402.18</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>2.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When the sample was split across the 6 value-adding schools and 3 schools performing as expected, it is evident that value-adding schools reported higher levels for all of the positive factors compared with the schools performing as expected however, they had near parallel levels of self-sabotage (see Table 4.8). T-tests revealed highly significant differences in favour of the value-adding schools occurred for persistence, disengagement, maths self-concept, school affect, value coherence, parent support for education, and teacher respect (see Table 4.9).

It appears that schools that perform above expectations given their demographic profiles can produce more highly engaged students and it would appear that factors such as promoting a positive learning environment which makes students feel connected, where students feel respected by their teachers is a key factor. Also contributing to the success of schools
performing above expectations is that their students feel more supported by their parents espousing their educational goals and they associate with peers who hold similar educational values. Students in value-adding schools also hold higher mathematics self-concepts and will persist in the face of a challenge.

Table 4.8: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Above Expected and As Expected Schools on Dependent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Above Expected</th>
<th>As Expected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Of Schooling</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Sabotage</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math Self-Concept</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Self-Concept</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Affect</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging at School</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Coherence</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Support for Education</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Respect at School</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Above Expected n=1321, As Expected n=645

Table 4.9: Independent Samples t-test between Above Expected and As Expected Schools on Dependent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value Of Schooling</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>1964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>2.87**</td>
<td>1205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Sabotage</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>1368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>-2.09*</td>
<td>1964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math Self-Concept</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>2.75**</td>
<td>1344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Self-Concept</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>1964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Affect</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>5.70***</td>
<td>1191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging at School</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>1964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Coherence</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>6.51***</td>
<td>1964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Support for Education</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>4.82***</td>
<td>1167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Respect at School</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>5.10***</td>
<td>1964</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001
Difference between students wanting to leave school early, complete school or undecided

Using responses from the survey students were categorised into three groups based on when they reported wanting to leave school. The first group were labelled “leavers” as on their survey they specified their intention to leave before completing Year 12. Some of the leavers reported wanting to depart in Year 9, others reported Year 10 and a smaller proportion reported wanting to leave in Year 11. The second group was labelled “stayers” as all of these students specified on their survey that they wanted to complete Year 12. There were some students who were unsure about when they wanted to leave school so this group was labelled “undecided”. We compared the leavers, stayers and undecided groups across the dependent variables from the SRSE instrument (namely the five constructs: Perceived Parental Support for Education, Teacher Respect at School, Value Coherence, Belonging at School, and Friends at School). Table 4.10 shows the significant findings from these analyses.

Table 4.10: One-way ANOVA between Leavers, Stayers and Undecided Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent Support for Education</td>
<td>Between</td>
<td>95.52</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>47.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within</td>
<td>462.59</td>
<td>1854</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>558.11</td>
<td>1856</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Respect</td>
<td>Between</td>
<td>52.58</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within</td>
<td>1345.06</td>
<td>1854</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1397.64</td>
<td>1856</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends at School</td>
<td>Between</td>
<td>8.65</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within</td>
<td>1326.15</td>
<td>1854</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1334.80</td>
<td>1856</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p<.001

Overall stayers held significantly more positive perceptions of parent support for education and teacher respect compared with leavers and students undecided about completing Year 12 and leavers had significantly more negative perceptions of their parents and teachers. Significant differences were found for Friends at School between stayers and undecided students with the stayers reporting higher scores on whether they thought they were liked by their peers and the number of friends they had. Interestingly there was no significant difference between stayers and leavers in relation to having friends at school. Consequently, the number of friends you have does not seem to be a factor in this study that helps explain school dropout but in conjunction with other analyses conducted in this study (ANOVA’s, Structural Equation Modelling, and interview data), it is the nature of the friendship (ie. Value Coherence) that appears to be instrumental to the process of either staying on or dropping out.

4.1.3 Structural Equation Modeling
Multiple-Indicator-Multiple-Cause (MIMIC) Models

The SRSE instrument was shown to be a reliable and valid measure of the ways in which students’ social contexts might influence their academic engagement thus providing a robust measure of these contextual factors. Importantly, it was critical to determine whether males and females varied in their reporting of social support for education and whether the grade level of the students also impacted students’ perception of social relational support. Furthermore, it was relevant to examine whether there was an interaction between sex and year level and what the consequences of this mean for supporting students’ social contexts. Key findings and implications are reported below however, Section 5 includes specific details of the MIMIC modelling process, results and discussion of these.

Females were found to hold significantly higher perceptions of their parents’ value of schooling than males across all grade levels (Years 7, 8 & 9). Given the participating schools already came from low SES areas with (on average) low retention rates, it is possible that male students may perceive that their parents place lesser importance on their education than females as males may perceive that they are expected to leave school early to begin working. Two significant interaction effects were found for both Teacher Respect at School and Value Coherence. This showed that while year 7 students held higher perceptions than year 8 or 9 students, the drop in perceptions of teacher respect and the value of schooling they share with their peers may occur earlier for males than females. That is, the drop in perceptions of teacher respect and school values was more pronounced for males than females between years 7 and 8 (and stable across years 8 and 9), whereas for females, the decline is gradual from years 7 to 9. Interestingly, a similar pattern of results was found for the two factors Teacher Respect at School and Value Coherence. That is, the drop in perceptions of both teacher respect and school values occurs simultaneously across grades for males and females. It is possible that this decline is due to a students’ growing need for autonomy as they advance through the adolescent years (Gniewosz, Eccles, & Noack, 2012). It is interesting to note the stronger drop in perceptions for males between year 7 to 8 (whereby for females this drop was more gradual), followed by the stabilisation of these perceptions thereafter. It would be useful for future research to expand on this study with reference to later year groups to ascertain the ongoing patterns following year 9.

Structural Equation Modeling

Results from preliminary analyses alluded to the powerful association between social-relational (SRSE) factors and engagement. Drawing upon previous research in addition to the results from this study a hypothesised model was developed for testing. Pre-existing research substantiates that social influences including those from parents (Gniewosz & Noack, 2012), teachers (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997) and peers (Ream & Rumberger, 2008) are important to students’ engagement at school. High correlations are reported between engagement and school completion (Zvoch, 2006). Therefore students who are disengaged from school are more likely to dropout. Less however, is known about what social processes mediate the relationship between parents and teachers with school engagement. Inferences from the preliminary analyses and interview data revealed that values embedded in relationships with peers and schools could be a feasible explanation for how the influence of parents and teachers could affect engagement. Consequently, the model developed posited that peer (ValueCoherence)
and school values mediate the associations between students’ perceptions of their parents’ support for education and teacher respect with how engaged they are at school. Figure 4.1 pictorial represents this causal model.

Figure 4.1: Social-relational model of school engagement.

The SEM model fit was excellent with the thresholds for both absolute and incremental fit well above .90 and with an RMSEA less than .05. Section 5 reports the method conducted to arrive to the fully mediated model and the associated fit indices. The model has been recently tested across waves 2 and 3 and the results reveal an equivalently good fit to the data as the first wave. Implications of these findings are that parents and teachers are important drivers of student engagement. When students perceive parents value education and teachers show respect it influences students’ to associate with peers who care about school and this in turn increases their valuing of school and leads them to be more engaged. More positive associations with peers who value learning and school has a direct impact on engagement and inversely students who associate with peers who care less about doing well at school are more likely to be disengaged. These findings support research showing that high achieving friends can increase the likelihood of completing high school and enhance engagement at school (Rumberger & Thomas 2000; Kasen, Cohen, & Brook 1998). The hypothesised model shows that value coherence impacts directly on engagement while also impacting on a student’s own internal value of school.

Future directions. Longitudinal SEM analyses testing this model for developmental trajectories has not been possible due to the complexity of six factors across multiple cohorts and multiple waves of data. Consequently, subsequent longitudinal SEM has proceeded with simplifying the specified relationships. Future publications stemming from these analyses will be published in journals of repute.
4.2 Mixed method analyses: Interview data for students whose level of engagement changed over time

This section provides an account of a research activity which is still in progress. The Staying on at School project is exceptional in that it has generated a substantial number of longitudinal interview transcripts of students who were identified at the beginning of the study as being disengaged with school, and likely to leave early. In addition, each of these longitudinal transcripts is associated with three years of survey responses from each student. By analysing students' responses to various engagement scales, it is possible to classify the students as having become more engaged with school, or less engaged with school over time. This classification process is described below.

4.2.1 Measures of engagement

Five scales were used to measure the level of student engagement. These scales are fully described in Section 4.1, and are briefly outlined here:

- Value of schooling: learning at school is important, it will be useful to me
- Persistence: I keep working at difficult ideas/homework until I understand them
- Behavioural engagement/disengagement: I don't really care about school any more
- Self Sabotage: when I don’t work hard I have an excuse if I do badly
- School Self-Concept: I like going to school, I look forward to most lessons

Each of these scales comprised four or five items, and each item was scored as a Likert scale. Using data for the entire sample, the means and standard deviations for each scale were computed, and the standard deviations for each scale were also computed. For each student who had been interviewed, the mean scores achieved on each of the scales in both wave one and wave three were then computed.

In some cases, a student's scores showed a consistent improvement between wave one and wave three. In other cases a student's scores showed a consistent decline over time. The decision was made to classify students as “more engaged” if four out of five of their scale scores improved by at least one standard deviation over time. Students were classified as “less engaged” if four out of five of this scale scores declined by at least one standard deviation over time. There were also several cases where the scores on some scales improved while the scores on others declined, or where there was no substantial movement on any of the scales.

In order to be included in the sub-sample for this analysis, students needed to have participated in both the first wave and third wave surveys, otherwise the changes in their engagement scores could not be computed. They also needed to have participated in at least two interviews, and one of those needed to be the wave three interview. There were 55 students whose participation met this standard. Of these, 23 showed consistent improvement in their levels of engagement as measured by the scales described above. There were 13 who showed no overall change in engagement, and 19 who showed consistent declines in their engagement. Given that these 19 responded to the various engagement scales in a way that placed them one standard deviation below their initial responses, it is surprising that so many of them were still at school...
and still participating in the study. Only three of these 19 were year 11 students, and this indicates that there was a high level of attrition among the least engaged students.

### 4.2.2 Interview responses of more engaged and less engaged students

Using the classifications described above, analyses of the interview transcripts are in progress. Two possible ways of approaching these analyses are as follows:

- To assemble the three interviews for each student as a longitudinal narrative and explore the ways in which the individual’s story changes over time, or
- To disaggregate the interviews into topics, and look at changes in students responses in relation to those topics over time.

Five topics have been identified. These are:

- **Choices:** in this topic students mostly talking about choices they are making as they move into the senior years, in relation to subjects and electives. Students who have become more engaged have identified electives that they are interested in, and have found that some of the subjects they are studying relate to their future career goals.
- **Effort:** here, students are talking about the extent to which they try to succeed at school. Students who have become more engaged talk about working harder, and in some cases giving up their part-time employment in order to focus on schoolwork.
- **Family:** students who have become more engaged often name a family member who has made a comment that triggered change in their attitude towards staying on.
- **Friends:** student responses to this topic can be inconsistent. Students who have become more engaged sometimes tell us that they have changed their friends and are connecting with students who are more positive towards school. On the other hand, students who have become less engaged may also change their friends. This may be motivated by a desire to keep out of trouble, even if they are not becoming more engaged or planning to stay on.
- **Teachers:** as students grow older they tend to understand that teachers are “human” and that if you want to be respected you need to respect them. Many of the students who became more engaged spoke warmly about teachers who had helped them and supported them.

This research activity is complex, and as already noted, is still in progress. In particular, further work is needed on the longitudinal analysis of individual transcripts.
4.3 Qualitative analysis of interview data

The results presented in this section are based on analyses of the student interview transcripts. These transcripts were created from audio and video recordings of our conversations with the students. Each interview / conversation was verified by reviewing the transcribed text and comparing it with the original audio or video recording. The interviews were then code thematically, and the coded interviews were analysed using NVivo software. This led to identification of the themes and issues outlined below.

4.3.1 How to improve schools: A breakdown

Many of the comments that indicated ways students felt that school could be improved have already been identified and expanded on in the sections Making learning fun, active and more relevant for all students and Better and cleaner facilities, more resources, and hence won’t be reiterated here. New or additional themes that have not been identified in the aforementioned sections but will be discussed below include; teachers, assignments and school work, uniforms, no change, racism, getting along, mobile phones, choices within the school, and school and classroom structure. Following this breakdown is a number of quotes that illustrate the points made.

Teachers were mentioned in a variety of ways in regards to the changes students would make to improve the school. General comments that multiple students made include: they would like some teachers to be changed or no longer at the school; sometimes the teaching strategies of the teacher did not work for them as a learner; and if they were able to give advice to their teachers, they would tell them to relax, calm down, and be happy, engaging and active in the classroom. One student mentioned that they felt that the teacher was being unfair, as she often expected a large amount of work to be completed and handed in, but never took the time to mark or comment on the students work. The student felt that this was not conducive to learning, and wanted feedback to let her know whether or not she was on the right track. Students also identified favouritism as being a negative thing, and that they felt that some teachers were not encouraging or engaging all the students in the class, only the ‘favourites’. Assignments and school work were also commented on, some students felt that the teachers did not take into account their personal circumstances, such as working after school, and that the expectations of school work and assignments were too high.

The issue of uniforms was mentioned many times, with students feeling that the uniform was too strict, and that they did not like it.

Many students’ comments indicated that they found the school environment to be ok as it was, and did not feel the need to change anything about it. Others were of the opinion that the school was not a changeable thing, or that they did not have the power to make any changes – either the physical environment or the mentality of the people in it. One student commented that in order for the school to change, the mentality of the people had to change, but that that was something he had no control over. Another student commented that you either go with it [school], or you don’t.

Only one student mentioned racism, but many other students mentioned that they just wanted everyone to get along and work together. Students wanted bullying to stop, and for their school environment to be a safe and secure place to be.

Students also identified mobile phones as being an issue; they would like to be able to use them at the end of class once they had completed all their work. Additionally, as identified in the two
other sections mentioned above, students would like to receive a warning prior to having their phone taken away from them if they are misusing it. Additionally, having the opportunity to use their iPod to play music during class would be a positive change to school.

Students wanted to have more choice within their learning environment. Students identified that although they were on the Student Representative Council (SRC), they did not feel that they actually had any responsibility or power to make changes in this role. Additionally, students wanted some choice around subjects, such as making more subjects elective, and having the choice of language during year 7 when the subject Language Other Than English (LOTE) is mandatory.

In terms of school and classroom structure, examples of the types of comments students made include: The preference of having only one teacher, such as in primary school; more free time, to do their own thing for 10 minutes or so; school being offered on a part-time basis which would increase the chances of a student staying on; having more streamed classes would be a positive change, according to one student, as it would allow him to be more focused and less concerned with distractions from other students; more outdoor activities and excursion based learning; and finally, shorter periods throughout the day, but more subjects, for example instead of 6 x 50 minute periods of different subjects, have 8 x 37 minute periods of different subjects. The reasoning for this is that if the periods are too long, too much information has been delivered, and he cannot remember it all, whereas if they were shorter, it was a more manageable amount of information.

2009/ Angland / Joseph

... and you said you like this school, anything else that you could do to make this school even better?

I don’t know. I can’t change people’s minds, like that.

So it would be more about making people change rather than the school change.

Yeah.

What about the teachers?

‘Cos school is just going to stay like this, children need to change.

Yeah, what about the teachers? Would you have any desire to improve the teaching?

Better teachers.

Yeah, and what would they, better teachers look like, what would you want them to do?

Have fun with the class and teach them at the same time.

So you don’t find the school fun?

Oh yeah, I do but not in classes.

So you like recess and lunch time?

Yeah.

2009/ Bluefield / Bree

She does not have any hassles at school and said there was nothing she could think of that
would make school a better place to be.

2009/Bluefield/Brian

Actually, if we asked you how would you improve the school, make it a better place what would you change for the better?

I don't know, it's pretty good now, I guess. I don't know really.

2009/Bluefield/Connor

When asked what would make BHS better and possibly help him make a decision to stay on, he suggested two things:

• part-time school; and
• making the work a little bit easier and more fun.

2009/Bluefield/Kendell

She often gets bored at school, because the teachers “make you shut up, sit in silence and work”. She says she “doesn’t get it” and needs to talk about it, and then gets into trouble. She says school is better when you are allowed to work in groups. and would rather be working outside school.

Kendell said that she had no other hassles at school. When asked what would make school better, she replied that there should be no uniforms because they were really uncomfortable and didn’t look good.

When asked how she thought the school could encourage people to stay on her answer was – “Dunno – it’s not the school, it’s the people in the school”.

She expressed the view that school could be made better if there were no uniforms because they are uncomfortable and “don’t look good”.

2009/Bluefield/Lachlan

Anything that could be better about the school?

I don't know, I'm happy with the way everything is.

So if you were the Minister of Education or the Prime Minister, you could do anything you liked to make the school better for kids, is there anything in particular that you can think of that you might change?

Not too sure. Well, really if I had it my way I’d put all the people that aren’t exactly people that are nice and like ... I mean I don’t ...

All the nice people like you?
Yeah. People who actually want to learn, put in a certain class and the other type of people put in another one. Because it just sort of screws everything up for you. That's why some things are really slow, because you can't learn because everyone is annoying you.

2009 /Liverstone /Cadence

If you could change the school, what would you change?

Wow, I don't know. Probably like less assignments (L, Lv). Some people do have jobs and things so it makes it harder to do the assignments and if they do do the assignments sometimes they get to bed later (2HG) and blah, blah, blah.

2009/Oregon /Geraldine

If you could change anything about school what would you change?

Um... I don't really know. Um... maybe not as long periods, like maybe have more periods but like don't make them as long.

What don't you like about them being long?

I don't know, like sometimes.. it just like seems really long like yeah just like (SS – shrugs shoulders).. you get a bit bored like in the subjects and stuff. And 'cause it is long like and like you learn a few things and you might not like remember like all of them. Like the one in English

2009 /Oregon /Jasmine

If you any advice to make school a better place what would your advice be?

Um, to think of it as having fun and just to do it and learn as much as you can take it along with you.

What advice would you give to the teachers?

Um --

To make school a better place?

Maybe um .. [s] tell them to chill out a bit because yeah. They are like always rushing.

In what way rushing?

I don't know it seems like they are rush and they're all tired and stressed.

And how does that impact on you?

Um, I don’t know well, they don’t make you feel that good ’cause like, it just makes you feel bored.

If there is anything that you would like to improve about this school in particular what would it be?

Um, well, like the uniform ’cause like the school is so strict on uniform, especially shoes ...and um, yeah.

Are you allowed to wear slippers.
Yeah but we can’t wear like canvas, but I think that has to do with safety. But then again like we’re here to learn. But the uniform like is all right.

2009 / Plumsville / Beatrice

So why do you think – what could change in school to make it a better place for you? A more suitable place for you? What would have to happen to make school a better place for you to stay?

I’ve thought about that, but I don’t really know because it’s – school is so – school is school, and you can’t, you either go with it or you can’t.

2009 / Plumsville / Jeremy

We asked him what could improve the school, how could they change it. He said they should have more outdoor activities, so like excursions, he gave an example of going to the beach to do quadratic equations, but he said that the school stopped that because not enough people brought money for the bus. So they could no longer sustain that as an activity.

2009 / Rustion / Jessica

(She said that the school needed better teachers. The English teachers were okay but the worst teachers were in science and history, she said. She is very acutely aware of what she thinks of what is unfairness. Like teachers give the class a lot of assignments and work to do and then don’t mark them, so you don’t know whether you’ve done it right or not, but they are lectured and told that they just have to do all this work and then there is a teacher who appears to show favouritism towards one student, and gives that student additional notes which she doesn’t share with other young people in the class. She said that in term 2 they wanted to make a complaint to their teacher because of the way that she was teaching, because they were not really learning well because the teacher would give them work and then not mark the work so they didn’t know if they were doing it right or wrong. And they were told that the consequences were severe if anything happened, and most of the students, or her classmates have pretty good reports so they didn’t want the severe consequences. The severe consequences included having to have an interview with teachers and to answer the questions, if they answered them wrong or said something wrong then the teachers would confront them about it, and they would be the ones that would get into trouble for that.

We asked her if there was any way that the school could be improved.

She gave one story, apart from saying in general that you need better teachers, the stories she told about improving the school and making it possible or encouraging more students to stay on rather than drop out, she said that the principal makes a meeting of the top students in each grade and holds this meeting with the students and parents, and she had a friend who took her studies very seriously but got a bad grade in just one subject, PDHPE and she was excluded from this meeting because, while her results were generally quite good she had this one bad grade, and so she was excluded and she just got upset and gave up trying. So I think [Interviewee]
thinks that practice of making a special case out of the students who get uniformly very high results can have negative effects.

2009 / Strawston / Brody

Thinking back to the way that your teachers teach you, like for example, you know you had the film and cinematography and stuff in your English class, what kinds of ways do you think you learn better in the classroom?

(LA) Well I find it better if we like (SCH F) – it’s not really a way it’s just an idea that you could watch a movie and the scenes that we had to do instead of watching... we could answer questions while watching the movie and stuff.

So doing stuff

Yeah, coz (because) before we started it we were doing Frankenstein and it took us a while to do that, so we were falling behind, (LA) so I reckon we’ve actually caught up pretty quick, it’s like, quite easy (LA).

Oh yeah. Okay. Is there any ways that they teach that is boring for you?

(Corners of mouth go down) Yeah, because sometimes in geography we have ... like read from the textbook and do it, (LA) I don’t really find that learning, we are just getting it out of a book, because I really think the teacher should be teaching.

4.3.2 Making learning fun and relevant for all students: A breakdown

Students identified a number of ways that could make their learning fun, active and more relevant. Many students commented that school in general, or specific classes, were boring, and would like to see it become a more active, engaging and fun place to be.

In terms of atmosphere, students want their school, and more specifically classroom, environment to be a happy, engaging and active place. Students would like the teacher to be nice, understanding and energetic in their classroom and general school manner. Students commented that they would like to see the teacher be more active in both teaching and also as a fellow learner. Students want the teacher to help them make meaning from what they are learning, and for the teacher to be involved in this process as well. Students want more time to digest and explore new information and they would like the opportunity to talk through their ideas, questions and thoughts with fellow students. Students would like to be involved in the decision making process, and also to be rewarded for the work that they have done; through sport, hands on activities and movies. However, they would also like for these things to be included in their everyday learning.

Students commented a lot in regards to resourcing, and how they would like the opportunity to use more hands on resources and learning materials. Students suggested taking photos on excursions, the inclusion of more hands on and practical lessons, and particularly a stronger use of laptops in all classes. Students would like the classes to be more exciting and engaging – particularly through the use of multimedia texts and interactive mediums, such as laptops and computers and movies. Another way a student mentioned they would like to be engaged, is through the use of bright and contrasting colours, to help make the activities fun.
Below are some quotes from students highlighting the points I have mentioned above:

2009 / Bluefield / Kendell
She often gets bored at school, because the teachers “make you shut up, sit in silence and work”. She says she “doesn’t get it” and needs to talk about it, and then gets into trouble. She says school is better when you are allowed to work in groups. and would rather be working outside school.

2009 / Liverstone / Carson
and then I don't know there’s not really anything too much wrong with the classes and stuff it just needs to be more exciting, like it's boring.

Okay, so what would the teachers do differently?
I don't know, throw up a couple of colours on the things they're giving you. Bright, contrasting make it the activities fun, not just writing and lines. Because they have a different idea of fun like we love Shakespeare, we don’t. So yeah, if they could make it like.. like colourful, like you know, how my dad works on the grey machines, if they could put like colours and make it more fun and exciting.

2009 / Strawston / Bess
What other kinds of things can they do to teach ... in a different way?
Um, probably health, just like it more sport (S + FH).

You would like the make the subject more like health is, like phys ed and -
Yeah, sort of like instead of having health (S), just have it PE but then sort of like teach them what is moving in the body when you do this and that, sort of thing.

And what about in say history, what can they do differently in history maybe?
Probably not so many overheads and stuff.

Sorry I didn’t get that because of the boys talking.
Not so many overheads.

Oh yeah.
(L@C) Not like so much like work (L@C). Like time to think about it more.

So do you feel like you don’t have enough time to think about things?
Yeah.

And in what way, like can they give you more time to think about it?
Just like, my history teacher she is like puts an overhead up and then like ten minutes later she is changing it, and you don’t really have time to think about it (L@C).
2009/ Strawston / Ellyn and Cheryl

Would you like to be included in the decision making?

Ellyn [looks to Cheryl] Yes, I would love to--

Cheryl Like have a vote or something.

Ellyn Have your own opinion in [points to self] our school [ca].

2009/ Strawston / Gavin

What could they do to make it more interesting and less boring for you?

Instead of just blabbering on and putting overheads up and stuff like that, just get right to the point, and make the lessons more fun.

Yeah.

And reward us, like if we behave and stuff like that we get to do sport or something like that.

2009/ Strawston / Marty

Yeah, just like more sort of explaining sort of things, like explaining how and what we are doing sort of thing. Like in history, the first two terms of Year 9 all we done was tick up the overhead and that’s all we done and then a test comes and then just have to go through book and it is all there. But I didn’t know what it was all about [hg], so that’s the thing, so I just studied it and then when the questions come I knew what it was and everything but I didn’t know what it was for [hg].

2009/ Strawston / Richard

If you had to change anything in school to make it better, what would it be?

[bounces knees up and down & uses hg to express himself] I would probably be the way some of the teachers teach because they just put on an overhead and then explain it to you at the same time and so you are concentrating on writing and then they are talking to you as well.

Doing two things at once is really hard.

[n] Yeah.

Okay, anything else that you would change about school?

I would probably change um ... [speaks slowly] really I would just change the atmosphere of it.

To make it happier or?

Yeah. Make it happier and not have that many people act so down and all that. [n]

Ah, probably try and change the way they teach, more to be [right knee lifting up and down] friendly to the kids and all that [looks to ground] so that we actually
understand it and not [uses hands to express] learn it and test straight away.

2010 / Liverstone / Jacqueline

Yes, I’m just wondering about how you think school could be improved?
Um, if there was like more nice teachers and like fun sort of people and like classes where you can like interact with things and that.

Okay. And what kind of – can you think of any things that you would – what kind of activities that would make it more fun?
Um, like for photography for example, like if you go on the excursion and like go somewhere and just take photos of like random things.

Okay, you’d like to kind of do something like that?
Yeah.

All right, and what would those fun people be like, what kind of qualities would they have do you think?
Just nice and like understanding and that, just help you a lot more.

2010 / Strawston / Richard

Okay, right, is there anything the teachers could do, or the types of subjects that you do that could keep you here?
They could make it more, like bring you more into it, so you can actually feel what you need to feel.

Okay, good, all right.

Do you just want to explain that a bit, what do you mean?
Maybe they could instead of just coming in and teaching the class and walking out, maybe they could like ask more questions, actually figure it out with you, not just them figuring it out and then just tell you.

Yeah, so it is a depressing place because it is just dull [Richard nods] – okay. Any other suggestions? So change the physical space, what else?
They could, like I said before, make it more to what you feel like you need to do. So you could make, when you make it more what you need to do they could actually bring out things that you could be more interested in, like maybe in Maths instead of just counting by numbers you could count by something like, some other weird thing.

2011 / Redton / Charles

It’s Ok? And what about the resources for learning?
We could … I would prefer it if they had the textbooks on the lap tops because that’d be alot easier then. And I’d prefer all the teachers to use the lap tops instead of just every now and …
Like one teacher hates the lap tops. My maths teacher, never uses the lap top. Even though they save safely and stuff, he just doesn’t use it. And apparently you can’t do mathematical symbols on the laptops but you can. You can do it. It’s easy, you’ve just got to go into the right tab and you can get absolutely all the mathematical symbols [?].

4.3.3 Better and cleaner facilities, more resources: A breakdown

This node had a lot of information and many responses throughout, I have tried to draw out the themes that have been mentioned multiple times, although there are other responses that I simply could not fit here.

Students provided many responses that outline their ideas about creating better and cleaner facilities, and more resources at their schools. Several key words and phrases were continually used, including these either as I have written them, or in a similar derivation; ‘fix it up’, ‘broken’, ‘dirty’, ‘repaint’, ‘more/better resources’ and ‘bigger’. The main areas students identified as needing to be fixed for the school to be better and cleaner for all include, but are not limited to; toilets, air conditioning and heating, recess and lunch time spaces, desks and chairs, rubbish, resources, education and career, and making spaces bigger. These areas are expanded on below.

Many students commented on the state of their toilet facilities, remarking that they were dirty, disgusting, unclean, filthy, cold, and that many students used them to smoke in, making it a place they did not want to use. One student even said that he refused to use the facilities during his day at school.

Students also talked a lot about the climate of the classroom, the air conditioning and heater. Many students said that their classroom either did not have one or both of these facilities, or if they did, that they did not work adequately. Students would like to be comfortable in their learning environment, and one student suggested that having some control over the temperature in the room would be better.

The aesthetics of the school environment was a prominent feature for a number of students, particularly outside of the classroom environment. Recess and lunch time spaces was an important issue; some commented that they did not have proper seating or shelter from the weather, and others would like to see a quiet space that they could enjoy their break times in. The many suggestions included: having more trees and bushes around, repainting spaces, changing or adding colour, adding in chairs so they did not have to sit on the ground, and putting up shelters to protect them from the rain. One student also identified that being able to use the sports resources, such as balls, would be a good change. Another student noted “better grass. It is like dirt”.

Many students identified the chairs and tables they use in the classroom as being broken, old, and covered in chewing gum and graffiti. Students would like to see these replaced to create a nicer, cleaner environment. Similarly, students identified that the school grounds were often littered with rubbish, and that some buildings were covered in graffiti – particularly the toilets. One student suggested having bins that were bolted to a pole and a concrete slab, which he had seen done at another school. This way, other students would not be able to pick the bins up and roll them around, tipping out the rubbish.

Resources such as replacing old textbooks that were falling apart, the provision of more art resources, new equipment for the sports and metalwork rooms, increased use of the laptops
and computers available at the school, and having better internet speed and access were identified. Whilst many students would like to see an increased use of interactive whiteboards in their classes, one student observed that as some teachers were not familiar with the device, a large proportion of the class was taken up in getting the software to work.

There were several mentions of a greater focus on the educational aspects of school, as well as involving a greater variety of career-based options. One student noted that a proportion of their class time was taken up by having to travel to a different location for a particular class, and would like to see the teachers come to them. Another student felt that too much time and focus was on a particular part of the school – the Peace Garden – and that the focus should be brought back to the education of students.

Finally, students often mentioned making certain areas of the school bigger, such as the agriculture block, library, the art and metalwork rooms, and in some cases, classrooms. Some students also suggested having a pool onsite.

Below are some quotes from students highlighting the points I have mentioned above:

2010 / Liverstone / Timothy

**How do you think the school could be improved?**

Clean the toilets, yuk. Other than that it is pretty good.

**Okay, and why do you think that is important, how dirty are they?**

I don’t like even going to the toilets anymore at school.

**So you’re put off by it?**

Yeah.

**And besides just being cleaned, what do you think would be a good thing about, if they did clean them and stuff, why would you like that?**

Oh just be able to use them again, yeah, sort of holding it in all day.

2011 / Bluefield / Jane

**The physical state of the school**

The walls are cracked, the windows don’t close; it’s cold; the plumbing in the toilets doesn’t work, they don’t flush, the paint is scratched off, they smell putrid – there’s one bunch of girls who are always smoking there and the teachers can’t stop it;

The school is not a pleasant place to be – the shelters are wet and cold, there are no seats – it’s uncomfortable and muddy, floods.

However, she says she’s proud of some of the students and their achievements.

Bluefield High has a poor reputation, but it’s OK.

**What would make school a better place?**

Fix up the cracks in the walls in the classrooms, the classrooms are appalling – lots of graffiti on the walls and desks – students damage the desks, which she disapproved of.
2009 / Angland / Jacob

I would put air cons in every room and try to make the library bigger.

Yeah.

And build a lot of stuff for agriculture.

What in?

For agriculture, because like you've got this really massive bushland that we have, I don't know why they are not cutting it down and making a bigger field.

Oh, it is really quite small?

Yeah, you've got that, all this, you've got the agri farm and then you've got the massive bush area.

2009 / Oregon / Candice with Daisy

What things would be better at school, how could things be improved?

Candice  Fix it, fix it up, just the look of it, like all the classrooms are disgusting, like chewy under the desks and the carpets, they are getting new carpets in some of the classrooms but the rest are just yuk. And they've got aboriginal paintings outside, but they could make it look better, it just looks yuk. The only nice buildings they have are the offices and stuff, they are new.

2010 / Strawston / Richard

[laughs] What would make this school a better place for you?

Um, they would make it a better place if it was not so boring, like -

You mean the teachers or what?

Everything, like even when you walk around the school you just see grey concrete, grey walls, it is not really bright and happy.

2011 / Angland / Henrietta

We asked what changes she would like to see at the school

She said everything is pretty much right. She did bring up the issue of smart boards and she said, they are a pain because when the teacher goes to write on it, it takes them longer than it would on a white board. It takes a while to set up and to start up and stuff, so the teacher ends up dictating stuff instead of just putting an overhead up. In the lessons, the very first one, when they got the smart board they got to play fun games in the lesson, but not now. They used PowerPoint in the library on the smart board to put their notes up on the smart board. She could only think of a handful of times when they actually used them.
**2011 /Angland / Tiffany**

**I see, and what else?**

Um, like how much rubbish there is like in school, I guess, getting someone to clean it up or something like that, and like just have like a quiet area, like in the sun or something, like where everyone can come and hang out. A place besides the basketball court or a place that is just like a sit down area.

**So there is nothing like that really?**

Well there is like one, but it is like, has toilets around it and it is just dark and shadowy, I don’t like it.

**You mean an outside area like the library would be a quiet place?**

Yeah, like a place where you can like sit down and there is like benches and trees and–

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**2011 /Bluefield / David**

**Is there anything that would make school a better place for you personally?**

Probably the shelters are pretty ordinary.

**Outside?**

Yeah, like one shelter we had it for two years and it floods all the time. Whenever it rains the water runs through it so that's not real good.

**Uncomfortable?**

Yeah, and maybe some walls around them because today it’s cold and windy and you’ve got no protection from the wind or anything in the shelters.

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**2011 /Oregon / Abel**

**Something you were talking about earlier?**

The bathrooms is a main one, I think I may have talked about that last time, but the bathroom is a big deal, it is really disgusting. And apparently the girls’ bathroom is better than the boys’ bathroom, like it is always cleaner, and the smoking at the school as well. Like you see people in the bathrooms and stuff as well, that is pretty bad. A lot of the things I would change is what I talked about before which is just teachers and stuff, the whole curriculum and stuff and just certain classes.

**And the teachers ...?**

Basically, yeah.

**And having someone to go to to talk about your career?**

Yeah, you would think they would have a little bit more of an open thing there, instead of just construction apprenticeships.

**Yeah, so who arranges the apprenticeships, the careers adviser?**
I think so, I’m not too sure, I haven’t really talked too much about it because my friend was looking for something and I went with him to talk to the guy as well, and we had construction, I think, and mechanics, I think was the other one. So yeah, that is basically pretty much it.

2011 /Redton /Charles

And what about the playground and the outside areas?

It’s pretty messy. I think some of the students need to put the rubbish in the bin and instead of having bins that the students can move around anywhere and tip over, because they do it all the time, actually they should put bins [?]. I’ve seen them at another school, they have likethese little poles and they literally bolt bins to the poles, and bolted into concrete so that they can’t move them around, tip them over and everything.

You were talking about heaters and air conditioners that need to be changed at school.

The heaters and air conditioners really need to be changed, like because they’re not very safe and they just don’t work. I’ve seen a student play with a lighter in class and if they were right next to the heater I can see ... Everyone can see the gas pouring out on top of them.

So it’s these unflued gas heaters?

Yeah, so if one of the students was playing next to the heater, playing with a lighter and burning a desk it could set the whole class alight. So that’s very dangerous.

And you said that the air conditioners don’t work, so is it hot in summer and cold in winter, is that what you're saying?

Yeah.

I don’t want to put words in your mouth.

Yea, basically.

I think it’s important for us to clarify what you’re saying.

Yeah, and they need to work, like cool us down in summer and heat us in winter. And havethem so that they’re safe ... Have them so they’re safe enough so that basically students can change according to what ... Students basically change it and it’s because they can take the controls and stuff.

Adjusting the climate so it’s all about the learning environment?

So it’s about comfort.

Yeah, so it’s comfortable to work in.

So would you say ... Again, I don’t want to put words in your mouth, but would you say that that lack of comfort is something that interferes with your learning?

With not just my learning, I reckon a couple of ... Quite a few of the other students I’ve seen, they won’t work because it’s too cold and the teacher will not ... You can’t put the heater on because they’re broken and the repairman doesn’t come in every month and stuff, or when he’s supposed to. It’s the cold and I just can’t work because of the shaking (from the cold).

But how does the temperature in winter and summer in the school compare to the temperature inside your own home in winter and summer?
With our own home you can change it to what we need so that we’re not too hot we’re not too cold, we’re just (comfortable) and you can study and everything.

2010 / Oregon / Davey

Whatever you think of like the school, the school in general.
Well maybe instead of letting us catch the bus over there every ag lesson maybe like bring the teachers over here, instead of going over there, because it wastes, like we have to get out – we only get a 20 minute class because we’ve got to catch the bus, some of the classes are over here.

And you’ve just got to wait for the bus whenever it shows up, it is not a school bus?

Yeah, the school owns it but the bus driver is usually late.

Great. So what could they do, you don’t really have anyone here that is – there is no farm?

No there is no farm, but I suppose a spare classroom or something that we can -

And the way that it has got the timetable do you have it either at the beginning of the day or at the end of the day so you only have to catch the bus there once, you don’t have to catch the bus there and then back here again?

Yeah, you like find your own way there in the mornings and the bus brings you back here.

Yeah, does it not come to pick you up on time there?

Nuh. Like this afternoon we got it at 1.00 but usually it doesn’t come to like 1.30, so yeah.

Great. So does that cut into your time there?

Um, no, it is in lunch time when it comes this afternoon, but like in the mornings and that, the bus doesn’t come and pick us up over there until usually half way through second period.

So what do your teachers think about that?
The teachers just get annoyed, I can tell. Yeah.

2009 / Rustion / Andelko

If your school wanted to do something different to encourage students to likeschool, what could they do differently?

Perhaps if the school and staff were thinking more on the education. Everyone says this school cares about the peace garden. For some reason some people care about the peace garden. Some people always come and trash it and then they focus on the peace garden, not our education.

So how could they do things differently?

They should think about us and help us. One of the girls came from SXXXXX and she said the school cared more about the look of the school than the education, and she said that a lot of the books were old and broken. Then she came to this school.
4.3.4 Relationships with Teachers: A breakdown

There are a lot of data in regards to students’ relationships with teachers, so I have broken it down into 3 sections as it was coded: Ambivalent, approving and disapproving. I have put together a breakdown of each of these three sections, with a selection of quotes that reflect the themes that are coming out.

**AMBIVALENT**

Under the heading of ‘ambivalent’, student’s comments were a ‘watered-down’ version of the positive and disapproving sections. Students often mentioned that they liked some teachers, and disliked others. Traits that students identified were mixed, including: angry, relaxed, nice, mean, they yell, as well as do and don’t explain things. Students identified that whether or not they like and get along with their teacher, for various subjects, can often depend on other facts, such as; the teacher’s day, the student’s day, and the combination of students in the class. Some students felt that their relationship with the teacher had changed with age and the year that they were in at school. Others felt that their feelings, both positive and negative, had more to do with the subject itself, rather than the teacher. Many students identified ‘respect’ as a key feature of their relationship with their teacher, and commented that it depended on the level of respect as to whether they liked or disliked a particular teacher. One student liked the teachers that she felt she could talk to, and that she didn’t really like those that she couldn’t speak with in a more personal way. Some students made comments like ‘I just put up with them’. One student identified that she felt some of the teachers weren’t that good, but that they were learning from other teachers at the school, and she felt that was a positive thing.

*2009 /Oregon / Matthew*

Yes, some teachers are angry, some are all right, and some are just relaxed.

**Okay, so a bit of a mixed barrel?**

Yeah.

*2009 /Plumsville / Rhiannon*

**So just going back to your relationship with your teachers, you said pretty much most of the teachers you don’t like. How does that affect how much you like coming to school and working hard?**

Um, I just put up with them.

*2009 /Strawston 2009 / Erica*

**But they are both good?**

[s] They are good at teaching.

**Yeah. But they are not good at..**

[s] Being nice.
Ok. Do you get on well with your teachers?
Yeah, most of them.

Most of them?
Yeah.

Some you don’t though?
Oh this year has been pretty good but last year just wasn’t as mature as I was this year so get along with most of them this year.

So which teachers do you think that you learn the most in their class?
Oh, um, maths and English, them two. I like, learn, and history, yeah.

Only the nice teachers?
Nice, sometimes they are nice sometimes, like it depends how their day was, yeah.

Oh yeah, it is to do with what’s happened?
Yeah.

And um what do you think of the teachers at the school?
They are good. Like the teachers that aren't that good are getting there; they are learning from other teachers. So it’s getting better.

What gives you the impression that they are learning from the better teachers?
‘Cos um sometimes the teachers that aren’t that good at teaching the other teachers come in and they teach them how – like they don’t teach them but if someone is doing something bad the teacher will come in and tell them off, so then-

Really?
Yeah, some teacher, like the head teacher or something will come in and like tell them off to stop doing it and then Miss Qxxx will like, learn from that and she’ll like do it more often.

Okay. So that’s pretty interesting. So they will come in and they will do that in front of the students?
Yeah. ‘Cos if we are being really loud like when I was coming to English, um I was walking in the class room and um the head teacher of English was telling off this guy in my class and he’s really scary.

The head teacher?
Yeah.
So what’s – what do you think of that when they – the other teachers come in, into the class and they tell ... the other teachers what they are doing -

I don’t like the head teachers ’cos they are like really mean. But like, at least yeah and we haveto take out our music out every time they come in, ’cos otherwise we get screamed at.

Yeah. So does – do you think it is a good thing that they come in and they tell the teachers how to improve and stuff or?

Um yeah.

2010 /Liverstone /Miranda

What were the bad teachers like?

She didn’t seem to dislike them she just, she preferred teachers where she could actually talk to them, maybe discuss her issues and stuff. So those were the ones that stood out to her as good teachers and the others weren’t too bad but she didn’t really like that she couldn’t speak to them one-on-one in a more personal way.

2010 /Oregon /Chris & Davey

And um, Chris, what do you think makes a good teacher, or who are your good teachers?

Chris Um, my graphics teacher is pretty good. My building teacher, he teaches you a lot of stuff. I like the maths teacher. I guess it’s, I don’t know, maybe it’s the subjects I like are the teachers I like, I don’t know.

So why do you think that, because what are those teachers like compared to the subjects that you don’t like?

Chris Um, I don’t know I guess I kind of listen to them more because I like the subject, maybe that’s it.

Okay.

Chris Maybe I just need to listen to them more and they might be a better teacher in my eyes.

So do you notice anything difference between the way like they treat you or anything, in the subjects that you do like, that you kind of maybe don’t help you or something?

Chris Oh they help me, they help me a fair bit, most teachers. Yeah, they are pretty good.

2010 /Oregon /Jarrod

Yeah, so what are the bad teachers, why can’t they -?

They’re not bad, it is just some teachers are a little bit more smarter and a like a little bit better than them, that’s what I think. There’s nothing much difference.

Okay, so you don’t think they’re -?

They’re all good, just some teachers just explain it better than others.
How do they – what’s the difference in how they explain it, what kind of words, is it the words is it the -?
Just like the way that they put it out and show you how to do it, you just get it easier.

2010 / Oregon / Sharon

What kinds of things did they do in class that made them kinder teachers?
I don't know, they'd like show you work and then they'll help explain it until you could understand it in your own way.

Okay.
But now they just explain it one way and you have to do it, even if you don't understand it.

So do you tell the teachers that you don’t understand it? [Sharon nods] And what do they say then?
They just explain it to me again, how they explained it to the whole class.

And does that help or it doesn't really?
No.

How does it make you feel when they just do the same thing again?
Um, I don’t know exactly, it makes me feel like we need better teachers that know how to do things a different way.

What kind of things would help, what different ways would make it easier for you to learn?
Maybe try explaining it until you make sure everyone in the class has it, like can understand it and all that.

APPROVING

In terms of approving comments made about the relationship students have with teachers, a long list of adjectives were mentioned throughout, including, but not limited to the following: helpful, kind, nice, understanding, respectful, fun, funny, calm, encouraging, caring, passionate, and clear. Students were adamant that they showed respect towards and liked the teachers who also showed respect towards them; a reciprocal process. Some students pointed out that they liked the teachers who took the time to get to know them and their personal situation, and the teachers that treated them like adults. Students spoke positively about teachers with whom they got along with, and often attributed this to the teachers having taken the time to get to know the students, and to listen to them. Students discussed that they were ok with getting into trouble for their actions, particularly if boundaries and rules had been set. Students also mentioned that giving warnings for misbehaviour was better than if they had just been punished straightaway. One student commented that he didn’t mind getting into trouble by the teacher when he was disturbing others’ learning, and that what made the teacher a good teacher, was that she cared about all the students in the class. Students identified that they often like to discuss and chat about the topic, either informally with their friends and their peers around them, but also as a
whole class after a documentary or about the topic in general. Good teachers were seen to be those who let you do your own things others wouldn't, like sit next to your friends, play word games associated with the topic of study, or not give you as much work to do in the last period of the day. Students also identified the following traits to be conducive to a positive relationship with their teachers: included practical and hands-on lessons, pushes you [to learn] in a good way, doesn't have favourites, poses questions that make you think, talk to us – not at us, are informal in their approach, expect the work complete, goes out of their way to help, and have good or different teaching strategies.

2009 / Bluefield / Carrie

Do you think there's much support around to help you? When you come back to year 10, within the school, are teachers likely to help you be that more mature, focussed person?

Yeah, the teachers like even now like just my relationship with some teachers is just maturing, like so we're not ... We get along, we can have little jokes and stuff. Like my PE teacher we just have little jokes between ourselves and so it's good.

And do you like that?

Yeah. Because it's just like ... It's different to primary school because with primary school you're the kid, they're the adult, that's it. Like you know, the adult time and all that kind of stuff. And I don't know, just at high school like getting to the stage where I am at now it's just more ... You know.

Would you say it's more equal between you and the teachers?

Yeah. And in year like 11 and 12 it's even going to be better because it'll be more ...

You get treated like an adult?

Yeah, exactly, yep.

So have the teachers changed in the way they've treated you? I mean, you said you were getting angry before, because you've actually tried really hard to change that, have they changed in the way ...?

Yeah they have. A couple of my teachers, like my photography teacher, she's just very like ... Like she's pulled me aside and was like 'You know, it's good you ...' and my maths teacher, because I was so ... Oh I used to be so bad in maths, and he's pulled me aside and you know gave his encouragement and has given me class award and stuff to say well done for your behaviour and stuff. So they're kind of giving me that extra ... And my science teacher has pulled me aside and said 'We haven't had any problems this year, it's been good' and I was just like 'Aw, sweet'.

2009 / Liverstone / Brydan

Yeah, well Mr HXXX, he's got very much respect for me, that's my PE teacher. I know he's got
definitely respect for me so I treat him with respect because um, I normally swear a lot too, every now and again I will swear in his class but he like, he says yeah, he just gives me a bit of a warming (1HG). Next year if I don’t have him or anything he is giving me like a time out card so I can go and see him and talk to him and all of that. So yeah (N).

Yeah. So like back over in [LOWER GRADES] we used to talk to a teacher a lot and he’s gone, people

will treat you the way that they want to be treated and you treat them the way that you wanted to be treated, so I just followed that till today. (1HG) So if teachers like give me a hard time, I am going to give them a hard time.

But what this guy said to you was that you treat them the way you want to be treated.

No, (L@C) they treat you with respect, like they treat you how they want to be treated and you treat them how they want to be treated.

2009 /Oregon / Geraldine

What other kinds of do they do to make them good teachers?

(HG) Um, well if you like were away or something or if you just couldn’t get like what we learnt in that day he like stays back at lunch time and stuff and like offers help if you want him to like help you out with what we learn if you don’t understand it. Like he uses up his time to help us, in lunch times and stuff.

Okay.

And he like helps us like before a test or something if we don’t get it like the day before or at the lunch time or something, he will like help us.

What do you think of that?

(S + TL) I reckon it’s good so yeah.

Has there been a few times when you’ve said, oh, I need some help

Yeah me and my friends, like usually go to him like if we don’t understand it.

2009 / Oregon / Jasmine

So what about those teachers that are nice? What do you like about those teachers?

Um, well, they let you … like learn the subject, but like the way that you want to. Like it doesn’t have to be all like boring, they make it fun. Yeah.

So what things do they do to make it fun?

Um, … I don’t know, like in Science they let you do pracs .. instead of working all the time and yeah, stuff like that.

What other things have the teachers done that make it more interesting and not so boring?

Um, well sometimes they let you talk, like they are not, like, you don’t have to be quiet all the time and … they are just like, they are not mean.
Do some teachers understand that?
Yeah, yeah, a lot of teachers are nice and you can have like relationships with them if you are comfortable with them. But there are others that it is just, you are just being talked at, not talked to.

So you kind of appreciate somebody who lets you stretched the boundaries a little bit?
Well not boundaries, but like when you’ve got a teacher who says, okay, well that was wrong, and then they tell you about it and it is not, like just get out. It’s, they explain it.

So they are more understanding.
Yeah, just teachers who, you know, have passion.

Oh really, so you actually like the casual teachers?
Yeah, the casual teachers are really good, and they come in and they’re all nice and they are all happy and it is refreshing. But then, like I am not saying, because we’ve got some really good teachers here.

Full time teachers?
Yeah, who are like the same thing, they’re like 35, and that’s like, she’s really nice.

So there is one in particular who you are thinking of who does a good job?
Yeah, like you can connect with them.

With some of the good teachers, how do they run the class, what do they do that’s ..?
Well this one in particular, she is like, you know, it is like, you sit down, like you have a chat with her, and like some lessons like we pretty much all we do is just sit and talk with the teacher. Like we’ve had, like lately, because it is like end of year, and she is not going to force us, like if it is a hot day and we just talk, which is good, and other hot days like you watch a movie and then afterwards you’ll have a discussion. And then like you will copy some notes down and have another discussion, they just don’t like reading things out.

But the discussion are about the subject?
Yeah, yeah.

Okay, so you are still learning?
Yeah.

You are not just talking about your weekend or anything?
No, but like on a Monday morning or like.

Sometimes.
Yeah like on the Monday morning or like a Friday afternoon -

Which shows that she cares about you guys, doesn’t it, because she is actually interested in what you got up to, or what you are going to do.
Yeah, and it shows up that she does because -

**Yeah, it is not just about school, it is you as a person.**

Yeah, like when you are on a monitoring card she's like 'oh what are you on this for?' It is just nice.

**Yeah, what about earlier on in the year when you have a lot of work – how does she run the class then? Like would you still have assessments?**

Yeah, it is like, she is not a big bludge teacher.

**Yeah.**

She’s – like some days you know you sit down and we write, but there is lots of discussions. She puts us through discussions even like asks us little questions and diagrams and ... She just, I like it how she talks to the class.

**She gets your feedback?**

Yeah. It is good.

With English, he is good too, like he does the same sort of – he is nice, he is an older guy and like he does the same thing, he cares about his students, and um, yeah, like he is a bit of a push over. You could easily treat him as a push over, but because he is so nice people respect him, and they do the work because you know, he is a nice guy.

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2009 / Plumsville / Rhiannon

**Terrific. Good, and what about the English teacher.**

She is nice.

**Yeah. What about her makes her nice? If I was to say I wanted to copy her as a teacher what would you suggest I do?**

Um, she like, she doesn’t pick favourites and stuff and she can take a joke and sometimes she is serious and then everyone understands and stuff. Other times she is like just funny and easy to get along with.

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2009 / Plumsville / Shannon

**What does she like about her teachers?**

She likes the art teacher, funny, does questions that make us think. The history geography teacher are heaps nice and gives me less work when I am having a bad day so they understand when she is having trouble doing work.

**When does she not give much work? When can she tell that she doesn’t want to do work?**

When she comes into the class and she doesn’t take her books out and doesn’t do any work, so the teacher picks up on it pretty good
What makes it easier to learn?
If they are strict they push you and help you, but they can help you the same as other teachers, but they can also push you so you can learn. They are strict and push you in a good way.

So what makes him/her the best English teacher?
Baird: Oh him. I don’t know, he’s just a good bloke. He’s real nice and he’s not hard on you. Like, any other subject you’ll be talking and they’d be yelling down your throat. He just doesn’t care. He just expects you to get your work done and that’s all.

So which teachers do you like?
Ellyn: [looks to Cheryl] I like my maths teacher, he is all right [shuffles leg].

What kinds of things do you like about him?
Ellyn: He is just nice, [animated hg] if you like don’t get something, he will stand there and actually talk to you instead of the teacher just ignoring you.
Cheryl: [inaudible]
Ellyn: [p w/hr] Yeah, he is cool.
Ellyn: [hg, one hand] He kind of talks to you like – he acts like a bunch of us so you kind of relate better to him [ca].

Is he younger or older?
Ellyn: [looks to Cheryl, s] I have no idea.
Cheryl: I think he is about 30 something.
Ellyn: He has two young kids, so I think he is old [girls l]
Cheryl: Well at least he lets you talk and stuff.

Yeah. So he lets a little bit of noise in the class, and do you like that?
Cheryl: Yeah, prefer it than like dead silence.
Cheryl: Some teachers are like, oh yeah “put your phone away”, or turn it off, and some are like, “give me your phone” and you get it back at the end of the day.

What do you think would be appropriate?
Ellyn: [hg one hand] I think if they just told us to turn it off and like give us a warning instead of just [hg snatching motion] snatching it off you [ca].
What are the other teachers like in the way that they teach you?

Ellyn [looks to Cheryl] I reckon the older ones like explain it heaps better. They know how to handle it all better [sits up, ca]

What do you mean by that? Handle it better.

Ellyn If someone doesn’t get it [hg one hand] they will sit there and like help you until you get it.

Okay.

Ellyn That’s the only good thing about MISS LXXX see, she will actually help you if you don’t understand it.

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DISAPPROVING

There were many reasons why students were unhappy, negative or disapproving of teachers at their school, but perhaps the main one was an issue of respect. Many students identified that they did not respect the teachers who did not respect them, and that they felt that some teachers did not listen to them or their problems. Students identified that trust often went hand in hand with respect, and if they weren’t trusted, they teachers did not respect them either.

Students sometimes called either the teachers or classes boring, and identified some teachers who they thought were time wasting, such as through calling the roll for an extended period of time during the class. Many students identified teachers who were angry, or who yelled and screamed a lot, as teachers they did not like or get along with. Students seemed to find it frustrating when the teacher was too strict, such as with seating arrangements and talking during class, but also thought some teachers needed to be stricter in order to set boundaries and keep students in line. One student identified a teacher who constantly made empty threats when it came to lunchtime detention. Other students talked about rules, and how sometimes the teachers were inconsistent across the school. Students often identified talking or sitting with friends being a point of difference between a good or bad teacher, with many students wanting to engage in group work or conversations with their peers about their work.

Often the teaching style of the teacher did not match the learning style of the student, and some students felt that the teacher didn’t explain things and paced the lesson too fast for them to be able to keep up. Students also mentioned that some of their teachers were not able to control the class, and that this affected their learning; either by them playing up, others playing up and distracting them, or by the teacher taking too much time to settle and control the class instead of spending the time teaching. Students sometimes felt that the teacher was telling them what to do - dictating the notes they were to take or drawing on their artwork – as opposed to helping the students learn. Interestingly, some students said they wanted younger teachers, fresh out of uni, because they were positive and energetic, while the older teachers could often be stuck in their ways. Other students remarked that they liked the older teachers, and the younger ones tried too hard to be friends.

In a few cases, students had identified situations where they had gone to authority figures within the school and were not believed, or were thought to be lying. Students sometimes felt that they weren’t being taken seriously, and that particular teachers were picking on them. Several students mentioned scenarios where they felt that the teacher was bullying them or other students; though name calling, verbal put downs, disclosing private or sensitive
information to others, talking about them behind their back to other students, physically assaulting them, or slandering them.

2009 / Angland / Jackson

The teachers, they teach us but they don’t like drill into us, there are some lenient teachers that just let us run around the class. They should be more like stricter. The discipline in the playground, they let us play tackle football.

It gets too rough do you think?
The teachers don’t come down and actually tell us and all take the ball.

So you think sometimes the teachers aren’t strict enough?
Yeah.

Okay, and you think if they were strict, more strict that that would help – in what way?
It would like put some of the kids back into line.

2009 / Bluefield / Cassie

I don’t know. There’s some teachers that like will respect you and stuff and then there’s other teachers that kind of don’t trust you with stuff and treat you differently to other students and stuff and I don’t like that.

What sort of things don’t they trust you about?
I don’t know, just little things.

Do you mean trust you personally?
Yep.

Or just students generally?
Like I feel that teachers won’t trust me.

What do they do that makes you feel that?
I don’t know, just ... I’m not even sure. (looking down and fidgeting)

Do the teachers here respect what the students think?
Personally I don’t really think so.

So has there been anything in particular that’s happened that’s sort of given you this feeling?
I know there has I just can’t really think of it at the moment and I don’t know how to explain it. (hugs herself)

2009 / Bluefield/ Clare

Oh one of the teachers, I only just found out that she was actually talking about me to a student. Like behind my back, calling me names, so that got me really angry.
Yeah, it’d probably do it for me too.

One of the teachers was …?

Hum, and to me that’s really unprofessional of them, to actually do that.

So do you feel that you could do anything about that? Have you got any sort of strategies that you could use here?

Yeah, well it was from ages ago that I found out she said it but still you shouldn't say that about a student. I don’t know, I just don’t really care because she's none of my concern.

It’s in the past.

Exactly. She’s not my friend, she’s a teacher so I don’t care.

Do you think generally though that the teachers respect the students here?

Yep. I reckon they do. If you’re nice to them then they’re nice to you, which is obviously fair enough. But if you’re not nice to them then they can be mean, which is I suppose obviously what you should be, to pull kids in line.

So what did they do that’s mean?

Oh not really mean in general but just get you in trouble, yell, stuff like that. Just the normal things.

Oh no, I just wondered what ... Because it’s a term that we’ve heard a few times today, teachers being mean. Mean teachers, what ... Paint me a picture.

Not really mean but ...

Oh talking to another student behind your back is probably getting pretty close to mean.

That's pretty mean, yeah.

Oh that got me very angry.

2009 / Bluefield 2/ Jane

She doesn't like Geography, Science and Art; She can’t focus properly in Art and loses control – can’t handle the teacher in art who apparently drew on her drawing – which she liked the way it was; “I thought school was about you learn, they help, not they tell you”.

She described the teachers as people who yell and are annoying. She often gets bored at school, because the teachers “make you shut up, sit in silence and work”. She says she “doesn’t get it” and needs to talk about it, and then gets into trouble. She says school is better when you are allowed to work in groups. and would rather be working outside school.

2009 / Liverstone / Kallin

Which teachers don’t you like?

To me Miss PXXXX in maths, she is grumpy all the time and gets you in trouble heaps. She is angry as a teacher, and she gets angry even if you do little things. And if you do something
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little, like if you put your rubbish in the bin when she is talking she will get you down to the
deputy's office.

2009 /Oregon / Abel, Millhouse, Saxton

The teachers can sometimes go into personal issues that they shouldn't be going into – like ... it
is just personal stuff that they really shouldn't be talking about in school or out of school.

**Okay, what do you mean?**

Abel Well our English teacher Miss AXXXX sometimes talks about like stuff that I might have
going on in my life and then she talks about it and just, doesn't, I don’t really like it, just talking
about my personal life and telling people that they have pubic lice.

**Are the teachers saying that?**

Abel [S & N] The teacher said that, yes.

**The teacher told other students?**

Abel Yeah, [points to Milhouse] and Milhouse.

Milhouse [S] I was scratching like, I know it is kind of rude but I was just scratchin' and she
is like, oh you have pubic lice.

**Okay.**

Milhouse And she made it stick, like.

Abel [hands in front of face] Like she told everybody yeah.

**She said it in front of everyone?**

Abel Yeah.

**And then did everyone then start hassling you?**

Milhouse Yeah.

**Does it still go on?**

Milhouse Oh not really.

Abel But yeah.

**They say stuff about students to other students?**

Abel In front of other students, yeah. [nods – N]

**In front of other students.**

Abel Like um also with Miss AXXXX our English, history and geography teacher um, the whole
class might be talking and I might say one thing to someone they feel like they might ask me
what page we are supposed to be working on and I told them the page and then she just picks
on me just for saying one thing when the whole class is being really loud. I think it is just
because my mum called her and had a go at her for being – for um, making fun of my weight
even though she is quite a large woman [small S], [spinning paper] and say that I would breaka
chair if I sat on it the wrong way, and um, yeah, so my mum called and kind of argued with her
and now she just picks on me out of everyone else.
So the teacher says stuff to you about your weight.

Abel [still spinning paper] Well she did yeah.

And what did your mum – so she called your teacher up?

Abel Yeah and just asked her why she did and also Miss AXXX said she asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up and I said I wanted to be a psychiatrist [clears throat] and um she goes ‘Pa! You won’t be a psychiatrist, you need to see one’. [raises eyebrows]

So you don’t like school?

Abel [SH H] Not really. I mean like I come ‘ere and I try to like learn and stuff but people like make it really hard for me to just do my work when everyone started talking or the teacher is just pickin’ on me, and then so I tell the head teacher Miss HXXXX what Miss AXXX said to me about the psychiatrist thing and then she says, ‘oh I don’t believe you, I believe the teachers over you’, and so nothin’ was really done until my mum called.

Okay, well that’s interesting, how do they make you feel when you weren’t believed or?

Abel Like, just shocked that someone would believe, that think that I was making that up.

Do you struggle with some of your school work?

Abel Maths a lot because I am not good at maths. My brother is the good one at maths, but – and he struggles with English, but I like English and I am not bad at English, just this teacher, my English teacher just doesn’t like me or – most of the teachers think that I’m bad because of my brother, because he went to this school and got me, got the bad name. So yeah, the teacher, Miss AXXX she just puts stuff on the board like about 10 things that you write and then I am not done writing and she just swaps it over and I say “miss I am not done” and she just goes “oh well write it later”, [sits up momentarily] but she never puts it up later and then I get in trouble.

Milhouse It is true, but like, well saying she is a bad teacher but like, she kind of is. [other boys under breath] She will just pick on Abel most of the time.

Abel And anyone sitting next to me, she automatically says ‘No, you can’t sit near Abel’ and isolates me in a corner or somethin’. Just because my – she said to my mum, [F] that no one has ever questioned her teacher authority in like 38 years or something, but … [SH H]

Abel Yeah about some of the stuff like – a while back I found out that my mum might have cancer and that was a real heavy blow. And then one day I was really upset in the class and Miss AXXX was yelling me and stuff and then she said what are you doing and stuff and I said “Well there is a problem going on, issues going on in my life” and she goes, “what issues? You don’t have any issues in your life, shut up and do your work”. And I am like “Are you serious? You don’t even know what is going on”, and then she goes, “oh, what’s going on?” And I am like “why should I bother telling you”. And then she went to Miss HXXX the team leader and asked if there was anything going on and then she said no, and the next day Miss AXXX is like, “I talked
to Miss HXXXX, nothing is going on in your life”. And I am just like, [SE, rubs face] you don’t know nothin’, are you serious?

Abel Yeah well I know how stressful it would be to be a teacher. But like the teacher don’t need to take stuff, like stress out on the children. And some teachers – like one of the girls in my class, I think it was one of her relatives was um, sick, [touches temple] like up here or something, like had problems, like um yeah, and one of the teachers said that she was mental, and so she took it the wrong the way and started yelling at the teacher because she didn’t know what was going – because the teacher said something that like, something bad about what was going on in her life. And so the teachers don’t know what they say does mean quite a lot sometimes.

Does she say these kinds of things to other students and parents?
Abel Not really, like she doesn’t really pick on anyone else, she only picks on me and my friends because my mum, [SS] phoned her and argued with her I guess. [SS] So yeah, now she is just yeah, [stretches finger] she just doesn’t like anything to do with – she doesn’t want to teach me or any of my friends.

2009 /Oregon / Candice with Daisy

What don’t you like about maths?
Candice I only don’t like maths because of the teacher, I used to like it.

Why don’t you like it now?
Candice The teacher is rude, I don’t know. I like doing maths but I just don’t like the teacher. All the other years they made it fun for us and stuff but this year she doesn’t.

But the teachers would like you for being the nerdy?
Candice No, but we have younger teachers here so they like the chatty ones.

So you felt ignored?
Candice Yeah, I guess because it just seemed like they weren’t interested in us.

2009 / Oregon / Deon

And what are the teachers like?
Yeah they are all right. I had one relief teacher last term that I didn’t like. She like used to call me names. Called the whole class names.

What kinds of names?
Anything.

Like for example?
Smart arse, she called a couple of us retards a couple of times.

**How did that make you feel?**

I just went to my head teacher. And got her, that I wasn't allowed in that class.

**Sorry I didn't hear it.**

I wasn't allowed or I didn't want to be in that class. So I did all my work in student reception.

**So you did your work in?**

The office.

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2009 / Oregon / Jasmine

**So what teachers – just think of some teachers in your head that you don't like? What sorts of things about them don't you like? What do they do?**

Um, well there is one teacher but we don't have her any more. Um, she would call us stuff.

**Call you names?**

Yeah like that were dumb, and we have the brain of an elephant.

**Really.**

Yeah. So we told another teacher, our head teacher about that.

**And did anything happen?**

Um I am not sure.

**Did the head teacher listen to what you were saying?**

Yeah. He said “thanks for telling us”.

**Were there a few of you who went to tell the head teacher?**

Yeah, like our group.

**And how did that make you feel in the class?**

[small s] Like ... that we were stupid.

**What happened after you told them? Did she stop teaching you or was it the end of the year? Was it last year or this year?**

Oh yeah, it was this year. We still have her sometimes but we have like another teacher now because she was off.

**Did she change at all? Or was she still the same after you went and spoke to the head teacher?**

She was still the same but she acted different when another teacher was. Like, she would act good, and when the teacher left she'd be like – yell at us.
2009 /Oregon / Matthew

[fidgeting (f) a lot] I dunno, it just seems like she picks on me, I know she doesn’t but it just seems that way, and so it just makes me get angry and then-

So that does make your behaviour escalate? Like more, or reduce?

More.

More, how come do you think?

I dunno, when I get angry I don’t really care.

And what is angry look like for you? When you get angry, what does it look like? Do you scream, do you shout, do you throw things, do you just become annoying, what sorts of things does it look like for you?

I just don’t do anythin’ I just put both my headphones in and turn the music up as loud as it goes and just sit there and do nuthin’.

And does she try and stop you or?

[n] Yeah.

And what do you do then?

Just ignore her.

2009 / Plumsville / Shannon

Does she have boring teachers?

She said the maths teacher puts everyone down and says we can’t do the work.

About teachers she doesn’t like?

She doesn’t like the maths teacher though, she can’t understand her and can’t read her writing. She yells if she can’t do it. And she yells at the class and says that they can’t do it. So she puts them down. She can’t understand her writing and she thinks she writes quite weirdly.

She doesn’t like the woodwork teacher, also because other girls tease her in the class and then she walks out of the class and she gets in trouble for truanting. So she doesn’t think the teacher really shows compassion because the teacher doesn’t pick them up when they do tease her.
4.4 Case Studies

4.4.1 Oregon Secondary College, Hunter Region, NSW

Senior high schools, secondary colleges and multi-campus colleges generally enrol quite large numbers of students at the year 10-12 level. As a result, they are able to offer substantial benefits to students in terms of a broader range of courses. In most cases, they also offer greater access to VET courses and TAFE pathways. While there are 18 such institutions within the NSW public education system, their geographical distribution means that many students whom might benefit from such institutional arrangements do not have access to them. This case study is based on research conducted through the Staying On project. ‘Oregon SC’ is a pseudonym for an exemplary Secondary College on the NSW Central Coast.

Over the past three years, Oregon SC on the has on average enrolled approximately 750 students in years 10 through 12 with approximately 200 enrolled in Year 12. The school serves a local community where many families are welfare dependent and levels of educational attainment are generally low (only 3 percent of parents have a tertiary degree). Yet the school is working successfully to raise aspirations for all students. Between 2010 and 2011 the proportion of the Year 12 class applying for and gaining a University place rose from 20% to 30%. Based on current indications and consistent with the policies the school is pursuing, the Principal believes this upward trend will continue. Oregon students who seek to gain ATAR scores and qualify for tertiary study are properly advised, but students who choose to follow vocational pathways are also carefully counselled and advised. This is important since employers in the skilled trades and allied health areas need young people who can use technologies well and are competent in basic maths, so students following VET pathways need up-to-date advice. Oregon is committed to ensuring that every student achieves an effective transition into further education or employment; this means catering for a wide range of options.

Early in Term 3 all students receive a Course Selection Booklet which is discussed in class and through additional information sessions and Career Expos. After developing their preliminary plans every student has a one-on-one interview with a staff member. Students may choose to pursue an HSC (which may be ATAR-oriented or general), a VET-HSC pathway that maximises employment opportunities, a Trade Training pathway designed to lead to an apprenticeship, or a School-Based Apprenticeship and Traineeship (SBAT) pathway. Some students are also able to negotiate a part-time HSC in combination with a Traineeship. While Industry Curriculum Framework (ICF) courses are offered in several areas including construction, metals and engineering, entertainment, and hospitality, Oregon’s achievements in the aged care and allied health fields are outstanding.

As the VET Head of Department Warwick Ryan explains, aged care is the major industry on the Central Coast. In local meetings starting four years ago, Aged Care and Private Hospital employers indicated that they needed more staff, and would be willing to employ young people and help to train them. Strong community partnerships have been built up since then connecting the school, the local TAFE, and employers. The school now has a training centre dedicated to nursing and allied health, where courses leading to Certificate II and Certificate III qualifications are delivered by TAFE staff on the school campus.

As Warwick says, ‘...it is really, really important that we all work together just so we achieve something good for everybody. TAFE get a benefit out of it, they have got work placements for
their people to go to. The school gets a benefit in that they have about 25 students basically enrolling in nursing every year.’ Some of the Age Care employers have up to 8 students at a time doing the required 105 hours of work placement, and every year these employers also offer School-based Apprentices and Trainee (SBAT) positions. Most of the students on the nursing pathway are doing an ATAR-qualifying HSC with an allied health or health services VET unit included in it. However, as the Staying On research project found, there are also students who have never engaged with the academic curriculum but develop a strong interest in a vocation like nursing or aged care. For them the depth and intensity of the VET offered at Oregon is important, for they can progress to a university qualification by pursuing Certificate III qualifications and then entering a University with some advance credits. Certificate II qualifications are much more limiting as they are not accepted as a qualification for entrance to a University.

In addition, some of the least engaged students at Oregon have stayed on at school because they are been able to combine part-time employment with their SBAT program, ultimately leading to full-time employment by age 17. Another strategy adopted with these least engaged students is to enrol them in a HSC pathway where they complete four VET courses in the first half of Year 11, deferring enrolment in academic courses. These arrangements are now in place for nursing and hospitality and the entertainment industries, with the goal of ensuring that if students do leave school at age 17 (for example, in the middle of Year 11) they will nevertheless have already completed a Certificate II qualification.

To conclude: the institutional arrangements on offer at Oregon ensure that students can pursue VET pathways that relate to skills in demand in the local region. Strong community links have been built with employers and the VET pathways offered are well structured and extensive. A broad and complex timetable means that students doing VET are not tracked. Their choices are kept open and those who make a late decision in favour of an ATAR-based HSC can usually be accommodated. The size of the Year 12 cohort combined with the intensive focus on nursing and health means that significant economies of scale have been achieved in relation to VET delivery in this area. Other VET areas of relevance to the local labour market are under development. Oregon also employs a transitions adviser who operates an extensive network of contacts in regional TAFE colleges. In this way the school also caters for the interests of students who wish to pursue pathways that are not represented in the school program.
4.4.2 Angland High School, South Western Sydney Region, NSW

The South Western Sydney Region includes many areas of severe socio-economic disadvantage, so it comes as no surprise that many of the secondary schools in this region have quite low retention rates. Angland high school stands out as an exception, even though its demographic profile speaks to the challenges that this school community faces. Many of the families who send their children to Angland are first-generation immigrants; 88 percent of the parents have language backgrounds other than English and 51 percent of the families are in the lowest income quartile.

Conversations with the school Principal and several teaching staff pointed towards particular features of the school – both practices and policies - that contribute to the exceptional results it gains. There was a lot of discussion around showing respect: the teachers show respect to the students, and over time they win respect back. One student explained his change in attitude by telling us that “… teachers are human too. If I want them to respect me, then I have to respect them”. Respect becomes ubiquitous. In addition to this, the teachers also maintain a well-targeted focus on individual student needs. Each week the entire school staff meets for case management. Any student who is having problems is identified (their photos are up on the screen). Ways of handling their problems are discussed. The goal is to ensure that any student needing help does not go unnoticed and unsupported.

Another important feature of Angland is the transition planning process, which is designed to help Year 10 students develop plans for the senior years based on their abilities, interests and ambitions. At Angland, high expectations are established from Year 7 on, and teachers consistently stress that every student will finish Year 12. Transition planning for the senior school begins with a careers course in Year 9 that opens student’s minds to many options which, in this low SES community, would not be common knowledge to many students at all.

During Year 10 every student develops a Portfolio. These involve detailed reflections on what students want to do, what subjects they want to select, what they want to be, and in addition, what they will contribute to the school community during their senior years.

Each student comes in for an appointment in August which is an interview with a teacher with whom the student has an established relationship. Parents are also involved and are required to sign off on the Portfolio and the pathways plan it contains. The more complicated students are allocated to a staff member – the Transitions Coordinator - who will be able to counsel them about specific issues.

All the students come in on Portfolio day dressed as if for a job interview. They take it very seriously – high heels, make up, new clothes and so on. Each student presents their portfolio and talks with the teacher about their plans. If their plans are accepted, they are sent an official letter, personally signed by the Principal, inviting them to join Year 11.

If there are problems with these plans or serious concerns about how the student might manage Year 11, they only gain a provisional passport to enter Year 11. They are placed on a contract, which is like an individual learning plan. When they start Year 11 these ‘provisional’ students meet weekly with a Transition Co-ordinator. At Angland they have found that individual attention really makes a difference to the provisional students. Their attendance rates increase, they start to take their assessments seriously, and they do not dropout.
As the Principal explains, this transition planning and support program is working really well. The retention rate to Year 12 at Angland HS in 2011 was 83 percent and it's getting better each year. This places Angland HS well ahead of similar schools in the South-Western Sydney region. In addition, Angland is a school that seeks to ensure that those who leave continue to engage with learning pathways, including well-supported transitions into apprenticeship programs.

To conclude: Angland HS is a large comprehensive high school that achieves outstanding results in terms of overall retention rates, as well as exemplary rates of student progression into further and higher education. Its success is strongly underpinned by a culture of respect, together with well targeted programs of individual case management and transition planning.
4.4.3 Bluefield High School, Riverina Region, NSW

Bluefield High School is one of three state secondary schools in a large regional NSW city. The school has an approximate enrolment of 770 students and 60 staff. On average 140 students are enrolled in the schools VET program. According to the 2011 Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, 41% of the student population rated in the bottom quarter while 5% rated in the top quarter. Of the full time enrolments at the school 5% of the student body identified as Indigenous, and 5% had a language background other than English. Many of the students who attend the school are second or third generation families of the school and this contributes to the overall school culture. The retention rate from Year 10 2009 to Year 12 2011 was 49%. The area in which the school is situated is predominately residential, but the school also draws students from surrounding rural areas. Bluefield HS is a pseudonym.

Bluefield High School has a diverse range of students, which means there is also a wide range of future aspirations amongst the student cohort. Some students have a clear desire to go onto university; others are focused on vocational education pathways; while some students struggle to engage with school and to articulate what it is they wish to do in the future. This case study draws on interview data over the three years 2009 – 2011 from both teachers and students enrolled in Years 7 – 9 in 2009. The students were chosen for these interviews on the basis of their indicating in the surveys conducted in 2009 that they were contemplating leaving school before the completion of Year 12 and/or that they were substantially disengaged with school. The case study highlights the many factors that contribute to, or limit, student engagement. The factors identified point to the complex character of what constitutes student engagement with school.

When asked about what is good about their school both teachers and students highlight the importance of teachers who know their students AND are compassionate about their individual circumstances. Students identified this as having a major impact on their enjoyment of school, and were able to articulate clearly why this was important to them.

*All the teachers, if you do well with anything or better than you normally go, they’ll award you for it. Or if you do something wrong at least they’ll help you out and they’ll give you the right idea to go to the next step. (Year 9 student)*

This one (of many) examples suggests that one of the factors contributing to student engagement with school is teachers’ willingness to engage with the individual circumstances of their students’ lives, their interests, their aspirations, and the importance of making learning relevant to those specific concerns. Staff at Bluefield are aware of the different educational, social and emotional needs of their students. They understand the need to juggle their responsibilities to keep all the students motivated, no matter what the students’ aspirations regarding staying on at school:

*It is a comprehensive school that provides every kid with an opportunity to succeed at some level in an area that they choose or which they have some skills... It gives them an opportunity to explore what those depths and skills are over a wide curriculum area. It provides that opportunity for kids, no matter what their background and what their race or whether they’re refugees or whether they come from a low socio-economic background – which 79% of our kids do. (Teacher)*

Some of the barriers to student engagement at Bluefield High school include complex family circumstances, adolescent mental health issues, bullying, and youth homelessness. These are all serious issues that contribute to individual student’s engagement. The school is addressing
these issues by providing a range of programs and interventions. However, the complex nature of these issues does impact on students’ decisions to stay on at school. Cyber bullying was an issue mentioned by both staff and students as a contributing factor to student engagement. However, both groups suggested that this was predominately a problem in the junior years of high school and most notable amongst the girls, not so much the boys. That much of the bullying occurs through technology and outside the school walls makes the issue difficult to address. It is clear, however, that cyber-bullying does have an impact on student engagement. Where students have experienced cyber bullying it has often meant they did not have strong peer groups within the school, making the time spent at school more difficult to endure. Staff also commented on the issue of homelessness, and related this to complex family circumstances.

[This is ] a very hard to record statistic, because homelessness can be living at a mate’s place...Homelessness is not the people living under the bridge... it’s this other stuff, living in someone’s garage, sleeping in cars. So it’s hard to say... because it’s not something you get kids talking about, they won’t admit it. They don’t consider themselves homeless because they’re not out in the open. (Teacher)

The reality for some students is that the need to get out of home in order to be independent of their family circumstances, and find a secure place to live may be a major motivating factor in students deciding to leave school. This decision may be reached regardless of the school providing a safe and secure learning environment for students during the day. The resilience these students demonstrate is worth highlighting, and it is important to point out that their decision to leave school needs to be understood within the context of their individual circumstances and may not always be related to their level of engagement with school.

To conclude: Bluefield High school is providing multiple educational pathways for the students in their care. Staff at Bluefield High School recognise that it is a constant challenge to meet the needs of students, especially those identified as ‘at risk’. The VET program has been identified as one of the programs that is currently working well for the students who take that option in the school. Specifically, the strong professional relationship staff at the school have with staff at the TAFE, is identified as an important contributor to the successful transition of students into Vocational Education. The school is also implementing a range of strategies to enhance student retention and engagement including a tutorial centre, a breakfast program, and a transition class, as well as, regular reviews of current practices and programs.
References


Section 5: Dissemination and Publications

Staying On Project

University of Western Sydney  
Charles Sturt University  
NSW Government | Education & Communities
Table of presentations conducted by the Chief Investigators
Dissemination: Presentations by team members related to the *Staying on* project, or based on our data analyses

### 2008

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16 May</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers</td>
<td>Staying on at School- A case of shifting settlements. Presentation to Brisbane regional conference Department of Education, Queensland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 October</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers</td>
<td>Brotherhood of St Laurence Social Inclusion and Youth Workshop, Melbourne</td>
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<tr>
<td>7-8 October</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers</td>
<td>Middle Years Conference – Middle School: Engage them in learning before they lose heart. DET Conference – Brighton le Sands</td>
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### 2009

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<tr>
<td>2 February</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers</td>
<td>House of Representatives Roundtable – Combining School and Work. This launched the House of Representatives Inquiry that led to the publication titled <em>Adolescent Overload</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-20 March</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers</td>
<td>Queensland Studies Authority - Shifting settlements, blurred boundaries and the need for an Intergenerational Youth Compact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-8 May</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers</td>
<td>Illawarra DET Region 6th Annual Principals Conference Keynote. Shifting settlements, the NSLA, and the need for an Intergenerational Youth Compact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 July</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers</td>
<td>NSW Business Chamber – Skilling the Workforce. This was a foundational seminar that led to further work by the Business Chamber and to the report titled <em>Could do Better</em> <em>(Richard Sweet)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 November</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers</td>
<td>Raising the school leaving age – Challenges and Dilemmas: Western Region Annual DET Principals Conference, Dubbo</td>
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### 2010

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<tr>
<td>25 March</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers</td>
<td>DET South West Sydney Principals Workshop – Achieving engagement and equity for all students</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 October</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers</td>
<td>Hunter/Central Coast Career and Transition Conference, Pokolbin. NSLA: Dilemmas, opportunities and ways forward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 December</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers,</td>
<td>AARE symposium - Re-engaging senior secondary students in learning: the challenges of Raising the School Leaving Age in NSW</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Katrina Barker &amp; Bob Perry</td>
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## 2011

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bob Perry</td>
<td>NSW Secondary Deputy Principal Association. Albury - Staying On Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-22 June</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers, Katrina, Barker, &amp; Linda Hamilton</td>
<td>SELF International Conference, Quebec, Canada. The role of social-relational and psycho-social factors in disengagement from school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 August</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers</td>
<td>Raising the school leaving age – Challenges and Dilemmas Video conference – Western Region schools (arranged by Regional transition coordinator Liz Hemmings)</td>
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## 2012

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<tr>
<td>16-17 August</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers</td>
<td>Improving institutional arrangements: Increasing the effectiveness of youth pathways. Invited presentation to the COAG Reform Council National Conference: <em>Good practice in Youth Transitions</em>. Adelaide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 September</td>
<td>Katrina Barker</td>
<td>Hunter/Central Coast Region - Engagement Symposium</td>
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<tr>
<td>18-19 October</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers with Oregon HS teacher and student</td>
<td><em>VET-network National Conference</em>. Canberra. Presentation title - VET Pathways: Inspiring engagement &amp; high aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 December</td>
<td>Margaret Vickers, Katrina Barker, &amp; Carol Reid</td>
<td>AARE Symposium - Problems and possibilities: Raising the School Leaving Age and staying on in NSW Vickers also presented a symposium with Susan Groundwater Smith on the same topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
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<tr>
<td>7-11 September</td>
<td>Katrina Barker, Margaret Vickers &amp; Linda Hamilton.</td>
<td>The influence of social-relational factors on young people’s engagement with school. 7th SELF Biennial International Conference, in a joint venture with the Educational Research Association of Singapore (ERA) Singapore</td>
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### 2014

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<tr>
<td>30 July</td>
<td>Katrina Barker</td>
<td>University of Western Education Knowledge Network. Promoting positive behaviour: Engaging the disengaged.</td>
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Published paper on Social-Relational Support for Education (SRSE) scale
Measuring the impact of students’ social relations and values: Validation of the Social-Relational Support for Education instrument
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ABSTRACT
A significant body of literature attests to the influence of social contexts on students’ engagement with school. A review of this literature led to the construction of a self-report instrument designed to measure Social-Relational Support for Education (SRSE). The conceptual framework underlying the SRSE instrument focuses on the factors that can potentially boost student engagement: these include young people’s relationships with peers, teachers, and parents. Specifically, the SRSE seeks to measure young people’s perceptions of the education-related values espoused by those to whom they relate most closely, as well as their sense of belonging at school. The psychometric properties of the SRSE measure are assessed in this paper through examining the congeneric properties of each hypothesised latent factor, confirmatory factor analysis of responses to the full SRSE instrument, and invariance testing. Results indicate strong factor loadings of all items on their respective scales and excellent overall model fit. The SRSE scale presented in this paper provides an essential foundation that will allow a comprehensive examination of the relationships between students’ social-relational contexts and their engagement with school.

Keywords: retention, engagement, dropout, peer influence, teacher influence, parent influence.
Submitted paper on a model towards Social-Relational School Engagement
School engagement and social-relational factors: Testing a mediated model

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ABSTRACT

Although the role of teachers and parents in influencing students' school engagement has been well recognised in past theory and research, factors which mediate this relationship remain largely unexplored. Using structural equation modeling procedures, the present study aimed to examine how students’ perceptions of their peers’ educational values and their own school values mediate the associations between teachers and parents with students’ school engagement. Self-report measures from 1966 high schools students in years 7 through 9 were analysed using structural equation modeling to test the hypothesised model and its invariance across gender. Results indicated that the educational values espoused in peer relationships and perceived schooling values both play an important role in mediating the relationship between teachers and parents with school engagement. Implications for these more complex relations are discussed for both practical applications in school settings and for further research.
COAG paper on Improving institutional arrangements
Conference paper

Prepared by Professor Margaret Vickers for the COAG Reform Council’s *Good practice in youth transitions* national conference, 16–17 August 2012

*Improving institutional arrangements: Increasing the effectiveness of pathways through upper secondary education*

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Improving institutional arrangements: Increasing the effectiveness of pathways through upper secondary education

This paper provides an overview of practices and policies currently employed in Australian secondary schools aimed at raising retention rates and improving young people’s transitions from school to work or further study. A wide range of institutional arrangements have emerged over the past three decades. Each jurisdiction has developed senior-secondary programs with distinctive features. This is to be expected: not only are the states and territories quite different from each other demographically, they also differ in terms of historically-conditioned mind-sets that influence what policy-makers are likely to suggest, how the public might react to them, and whether the suggested reforms will be acceptable to teachers and educational leaders. Across the jurisdictions, arrangements governing the senior secondary stage vary considerably in terms of the subjects offered, the levels of complexity of these subjects, how requirements for graduation are defined, and how student achievements are assessed.

The first section of this paper provides a brief overview of some of the differences in institutional arrangements across the jurisdictions and how these have evolved over time. Over time there appears to have been a degree of convergence. Institutional arrangements have evolved to the point where a common framework of positive practices for supporting increased retention now exists across all jurisdictions. However, since high school completion rates have not increased substantially over the past two decades, it may be necessary for schools and systems to consider institutional reforms that go beyond what has been attempted hitherto. Case studies pointing in this direction are provided in the final section.

In the absence of large-scale national studies of institutional arrangements for raising retention levels it is not possible to present a comprehensive description of policies across the nation, nor is it possible in most cases to ascertain how effective they might be if they were to be implemented on a broader scale. Much of the published work on youth transitions deals with senior secondary policies that exist in just one jurisdiction (such as VCAL, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning) or case studies of single schools (e.g., particular senior secondary colleges). In contrast with this patchwork approach, extensive and systematic research has been conducted on entry-level vocational education and training (VET) on a national scale over the past decade (see for example, Polesel et al., 2004; Barnett & Ryan, 2005; Lamb & Vickers, 2006; Clarke & Volkoff, 2012). Findings from this research are briefly reviewed later in this paper, alongside illustrative case studies that cover some promising and quite recent institutional reforms.

Retention rates and COAG targets

Under the current National Reform Agenda, Commonwealth and State governments have committed themselves to increasing the proportion of young people who make a smooth transition from school to work or further study (COAG, 2006). This agenda is linked to a specific target of achieving a 90 percent Year 12 completion rate by 2015. It is important at the outset to be clear about how the achievement of this target might be measured. Should students who complete a VET Certificate II be considered to be ‘equivalent’ to those who have completed a
Year 12 certificate? And in relation to high school completion itself, what measure should be used? How difficult will it be to achieve the target level of 90 percent Year 12 completion?

The Apparent Retention Rate (ARR) is the most commonly cited measure of high school completion, but as Lamb and Mason (2008) point out, it tends to overstate the actual level of achievement of Year 12. They point out that the ARR does not account for the inclusion of mature-age students, population changes, grade repeating or the availability of part-time study options. In addition, since it is merely based on counting the numbers enrolled in August of Year 12, it takes no account of whether students actually meet graduation requirements at the end of the year. Recognising the limitations of the ARR, efforts are being made across the jurisdictions to develop more informative measures of Year 12 completion, so the focus may be moving away from the ARR. Nevertheless, at this stage it is still the measure that is most widely used to estimate change over time. Analysing 2006 data, Lamb and Mason (2008) argued that the ARR is likely to be 8 percentage points above the actual graduation rate. The most recent ABS data indicates an ARR of 79.3 percent for 2010, but with an 8 percent correction the implication is that the actual graduation rate may be around 71 percent. As the next section of this paper indicates, Australian high school completion rates peaked in the early 1990s and have remained stubbornly resistant to further improvements for the past 20 years. From this perspective, and given that the ‘corrected’ level of Year 12 graduation could be as low as 71 percent, achieving the ambitious goal of a 90 percent graduation rate is not going to be easy.

Changes over time: Shifting settlements, new paradigms

Retention rate data reveal the distinctive and familiar shape of Australia’s long-term trends in Year 12 completion rates (see Figure 1). These trends can be considered in terms of three periods. The first corresponds to the long economic boom of full employment that ran from the end of World War II, which was associated with rising social aspirations and steady growth in school completion rates. These rose from a low base and levelled out at about 35 percent in the mid-1970s. Up to this point it had been taken for granted that most young people would leave school at the end of Year 10 and enter the workforce. Only a talented minority stayed on to tackle the senior curriculum, which was designed to transmit elite knowledge based on dominant subject-matter traditions and was intrinsically tied to University admission examinations. Associated with this period and its particular social and economic conditions was a distinct paradigm that defined what the senior secondary curriculum was about, and what it was for. By the late 1970s this steady growth had stalled and it appeared evident that there would be no further increase in high school completion rates as long as the senior stage of schooling remained exclusively focused on a curriculum designed to prepare students for admission to University study.
Taking a broader view, one could say that this early period was characterised by a social settlement in which the parents, the teachers, students, politicians and the media shared a common image about how secondary schools worked and how senior secondary studies should be ordered. This view of the ‘proper’ function of the academic senior secondary curriculum is still upheld in most high-fee private schools, even though it has largely been relegated to the past in terms of the policies and practices pursued in non-selective public high schools. In this paper it is relevant to make a passing reference to this earlier model of the senior academic curriculum because it continues to have a hold on the imaginations of Principals, teachers and parents in many secondary schools even today. Its continuing hegemony helps to legitimise the constraints imposed by the boards of studies and curriculum and assessment authorities that govern endorsed programs at the Year 11 and 12 levels.

Early in the 1980s, several conditions emerged that provoked new discourses and new policies for senior secondary schooling. Weaknesses in the world economy led to a series of structural adjustments, sometimes described as a shift from industrial to post-industrial production, but also described more loosely as economic globalisation (Brenner, 1998). Governments in most developed countries adopted neo-liberal policies under which corporations were able to outsource manufacturing to the third world, reduce overall employment, replace secure jobs with casual work, and increase working hours. Through policies of privatisation, corporations also took over many public enterprises that then followed the established pattern of downsizing and casualisation. An inevitable consequence of this was that the Australian youth labour market collapsed (Wooden, 1996). High levels of youth unemployment, combined with the abolition of youth unemployment benefits and the introduction of Austudy (which was later re-configured into Youth Allowance) meant that between 1982 and 1992, Australia’s high school retention rates more than doubled, increasing from 36 per cent to 77 per cent within a decade.

During the 1980s all states moved rapidly towards establishing a mass system of senior secondary schooling. However, across the jurisdictions, the rate of increase in completion rates
was not even (Vickers & Lamb, 2002). In 1981, less than 15 percentage points separated the six states in terms of completion rates, but by 1992 over 30 points separated them (Lamb, 2011). Differences exist between the jurisdictions in terms of their youth labour markets and the socio-economic composition of their populations and these contribute to variations in completion rates, but there are also substantial differences across the jurisdictions in terms of the nature of the assessment systems, the rules governing graduation requirements, and the nature of the curricula associated with different subjects or courses (Yates, Collins & O’Connor, 2011). In Queensland, for example, Year 11 and 12 students are not required to sit for external examinations in order to gain a Year 12 certificate (See Gilbert, 2011 for a detailed discussion of this system). Keating (2011) described the degree of differentiation that characterises senior secondary provision in Victoria. Alternative programs delivering a Year 12 certificate that did not include a tertiary entrance score were established in a large proportion of Victoria’s secondary schools through the 1970s and 1980s. This tradition was subsequently re-interpreted and re-established in Victoria through the development of VCAL (Keating, 2011). A common feature of the systemic reforms of the 1980s was that the nexus between high school graduation and university admission was weakened, so that increasing proportions of young people were able to gain a Year 12 certificate that did not involve eligibility for tertiary a entrance score (Collins & Yates, 2011).

By the end of the 1980s most states were enacting reforms that encouraged higher levels of retention (Russell, 1993). In most jurisdictions the Year 10 certificates had been eliminated, and the breadth and relevance of the senior secondary curricula was being systematically increased. In New South Wales, however, a complex pattern of reform and counter-reform emerged during this period. During the 1980s, elective units known as Other Approved Studies (OAS) were introduced and the School Certificate was actually abolished in 1987. At this point it appeared that NSW might move into alignment with other states which had already abolished the Year 10 exams. However, these examinations had traditionally been seen by employers as a qualification suitable for early leavers, so in 1988, the School Certificate was re-instated by the in-coming conservative government (Vickers, 2011). OAS units were also reviewed and subsequently eliminated. In their place units such as Contemporary English, Maths in Society, Maths in Practice, and a wide range of others were introduced. These units could be taken up by students who were seeking to gain a University place, as well as by those who had no aspirations for tertiary entrance.

Concerns about a weakening of academic standards were raised during the 2001 McGaw review and as a result Contemporary English and other Board-developed units were abolished. This created considerable frustration in high schools where many students struggled with Standard English, and students who needed practical mathematics to prepare them for the skilled trades often simply dropped maths altogether. Clearly there was a need to provide coherent senior secondary programs for students whose aspirations related to workplace preparation rather than university admission (Ayers, Beechley & McCormick, 2002). Now, in 2012, senior secondary arrangements in NSW are more-or-less compatible with those pertaining in other jurisdictions. From the beginning of 2010 the school leaving age was raised to 17 years. Coinciding with this change, the NSW Board of Studies agreed to introduce alternative English and Mathematics units that would be ‘content-endorsed’. These would count towards the completion of an HSC, but would not count towards an ATAR score. Finally, in 2011 the NSW government announced that the School Certificate would be abolished from the beginning of 2012.
A common framework of institutional arrangements supporting school completion

As already noted, substantial differences continue to exist across the jurisdictions in relation to senior secondary provision. Nevertheless, there are now a number of institutional arrangements that most jurisdictions have in common, each of which is designed to support increases in high school completion rates. There is now a requirement in all jurisdictions that young people participate in education or training up to age 17 years, meaning that students must remain in full-time education or in an approved combination of study and work for at least 25 hours per week up to the age of 17. Youth Allowance is not automatically available to students under the age of 21 unless they have completed a Year 12 certificate or a Certificate II Level qualification, or are participating in approved activities such as 25 hours per week of education or training. No state or territory any longer offers a Year 10 Certificate that could function as a trigger for early leaving. The range of units or subjects available at the senior secondary level has been expanded considerably, and options exist in all jurisdictions for studying core subjects such as English at a range of levels of difficulty. Elective studies, including VET at Stage 5, are widely available, so students in Years 9 and 10 have some sense of control and agency. They can make choices and begin to understand the variety of options available at the senior level. Substantial proportions of students can now meet Year 12 graduation requirements and achieve a senior certificate without seeking a tertiary entrance (ATAR) rank. Importantly, VET in schools (VETiS) has become a major component of the senior secondary curriculum across Australia.

VETiS has emerged as the major systemic initiative aimed at raising high school completion rates. A national estimate provided by the NCVER (2011) suggests that 36 percent of all students undertaking a senior secondary certificate in 2008 had completed at least one VET module or unit of competency. Research evidence from several sources suggests that participation in VETiS programs may increase the likelihood of school completion. Using Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) data, Lamb & Vickers (2006) identified students who planned to leave school before completing Year 12. Among these students, those who studied VETiS were more likely to complete high school than those who engaged in academic or general programs without a VET component. Studies of work-based leaning programs have found that students can become more engaged with learning if it is contextualised in relation to practical workplace examples (see, for example, the US studies reported in Steinberg, 1998). Work placement activities such as those included in Australian VETiS programs can also have a positive effect on labour market attachment. Further evidence comes from studies conducted by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (CES), which found that students who engaged with the workplace while at school had better prospects of gaining employment subsequently. After they left school, over one in four of those who had no contact with workplaces were neither employed nor in education or training (NEET). In contract with this, only 4.3 percent of those who had four or more contacts with businesses during their school programs went on to become NEET (CES, 2012).

Over time the range of institutional arrangements described above have become broadly accepted by parents, teachers, students, politicians and the media. This represents a second paradigm: that is, a shared understanding of how secondary schools now work for most students, especially for students in public sector schools. Each of the reforms listed above has arguably made a significant contribution to the completion rates now sustained across the
states and territories. The magnitude of the differences between the states in terms of high school completion rates has declined as these reforms have become more broadly accepted. In the past three years apparent retention rates have risen slightly, from 74.7 percent in 2008 to 79.3 percent in 2011. For the first time in two decades the retention rate has edged above the peak of 77.1 percent achieved in 1991. If recent reforms enacted in the largest state (NSW) actually lead to increased completion rates there, this will have a substantial flow-on effect that may further raise the national retention rate. It is, however, also possible that this recent rise could merely be another minor variation around the level at which retention rates have been sitting for the past 20 years. The next section of this paper examines some of the underlying factors that may have acted to dampen the growth of retention rates over the past 20 years. In the final section attention is focused on the issues that will arise as schools attempt to engage the final and most resistant tranche of the youth population. This may indeed require institutional reforms that go beyond what has been attempted hitherto.

**Why so little growth in high school completion, and what can be done about it?**

At the beginning of this paper it was suggested that trends in Australia’s high school completion rates might be analysed in terms of three periods. The first was the period of low retention associated with the dominance of the academic senior secondary curriculum. The second period corresponded to a decade of remarkable growth, from 1982 to 1991, when high school completion rates doubled. This decade ushered in a new paradigm for upper secondary education: one in which the senior curriculum became diverse and inclusive, designed to serve the needs of all students regardless of whether they were aiming to enter a University or were seeking to make an effective transition to work or further study. The third period – from 1991 to the present – contrasts with the second, in that little growth in high school completion rates has been achieved, despite consistent efforts across all jurisdictions to extend and develop most of the reforms initially introduced during the 1980s.

It is difficult to understand why high school completion rates have hit a glass ceiling; why they have remained stubbornly resistant to change even as the education systems have consistently improved the level of institutional support for increased retention. Looking outside specific institutional structures, however, one can identify at least two ways in which the broader context has been changing. The nature of these changes has almost certainly created difficulties for public high schools that are seeking to increase their retention rates.

One change relates to the substantial increase in the proportions of students who now attend non-Government schools. This increase has been especially significant in the non-Catholic private sector. In 1970 this sector accounted for only 4 percent of the overall enrolment share, but by 2010 the non-Catholic private sector was enrolling 14 percent of all students (Gonski, 2012). In just the past decade the proportion of students attending either Catholic or non-Catholic Schools increased by 6 percent and 14 percent respectively, while the rate of growth in Government school enrolments was less than 2 percent (ABS, 2011). Since retention rate increases essentially depend on the capacity of Government schools to do better, this has almost certainly made it more difficult to achieve the desired increases in overall retention. Shifts in enrolment share create difficulties for public schools for at least two reasons. First, they tend to cause a reduction in the size of Government schools that are competing with non-Government schools for enrolments. As secondary schools get smaller their capacity to offer a broad curriculum at the senior secondary level is reduced. ATAR pathways are inevitably privileged and most students will only complete one or two VETiS units that usually lead to a Certificate II qualification (Clarke and Volkoff, 2012). It requires large senior-secondary
enrolments to create the economies of scale needed for the kinds of ‘intense’ or deep VETIs that support pathways to further education or secure employment (Clarke and Volkoff, 2012).

The changing enrolment share has also increased the extent to which educationally disadvantaged students are concentrated in Government schools. Watson and Ryan (2010) found that almost 60 percent of the decline in Government school enrolments between 1975 and 2006 involved students in the top half of the socio-economic distribution moving into the non-Government sector. Many schools in regions of low socio-economic status have lost their most talented students to the newly created selective schools or to non-Government schools that have expanded their enrolments (Vinson, 2002; Ryan & Watson, 2004). Again, this contextual change is likely to make it difficult for public high schools to increase their retention rates. A number of recent studies indicate that when a student associates with high-performing peers, this tends to lead to an increase in academic engagement (see for example Crosnoe, Cavanagh & Elder, 2003; Frank et al., 2008). Adolescents’ social ties tend to link them to other students who hold similar academic values. High-achievers are likely to belong to academically supportive groups, while the disengaged are likely to reinforce each other’s tendencies toward dropout (Kim et al., 2011). As Lamb et al., (2004) reported, other things being equal, schools where the intakes have a high mean SES or high achievement levels have significantly higher retention rates.

The second underlying contextual change relates to the youth labour market. While there has been a consistent downward trend in the employment-to-population ratio for 15-19 year olds since 1974, the availability of part time work for teenagers has increased steadily over this time (Wooden, 1996). One result is that substantial numbers of full-time high school students are now employed on a part-time basis. Based on LSAY (Y-03), Anlezark & Lim (2011) estimated that in 2004, 41.8 percent of Year 9 students were combining study at school with part-time (and in some cases full-time) work. For this same cohort the level of participation in work rose to 57.4 percent in Year 12. While they found that participation in part-time employment was rather evenly distributed across students from all SES backgrounds, students from lower SES families tended to work longer hours. Those intent on University admission worked least hours while those who were seeking apprenticeship positions worked longer hours.

Current research on this issue reveals a conundrum: student employment has negative effects on high school completion rates, but positive effects on the chances of post-school employment. Above a threshold of 10 hours per week any increase in the number of hours per week a student works increases the likelihood of dropping out of school (Vickers, 2011; Anlezark & Lim, 2011; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2008; Vickers, Lamb & Hinkley, 2003). This is consistent with US research indicating that part-time employment reduces students’ engagement with study and diminishes their academic achievements (Marsh & Kleitman, 2005). However, part-time work offers strategic benefits for students who want to enter full-time employment upon leaving school. Recent Australian labour market analyses indicate that full-time employment is difficult to secure but that casual employment increases the likelihood of continued labour market attachment (Buddelmeyer & Wooden, 2007). This combination of factors is inclined to motivate students who would rather be at work than at school to take on part-time work in combination with full-time schooling. Across Australia, one can identify numerous policies and programs that are responding to this issue. Each jurisdiction can point to examples, and several of these are described in some detail below. Schools and systems that are contributing to solving these
problems are developing flexible timetables, supporting extended completion of high school, recognising alternative Year 12 qualifications, supporting combinations of study and work, accrediting skills developed at work and providing opportunities for second-chance education.

**Emerging institutional arrangements: Practices for the current era**

This paper has argued that across Australia there is now a common core of institutional policies supporting higher retention rates, and that while these may be implemented in different ways in different jurisdictions, they are nevertheless supporting a situation in which three out of four young people in each cohort now stay on to Year 12. The final sections of the paper now move towards examining the challenges involved in raising retention rates above this 'glass ceiling' of 75 percent. Public schools in regions of low SES are situated at the heart of this challenge.

Currently, the author of this paper is leading a research project designed to identify what might be involved in re-engaging students who, during Years 7, 8 and 9, had expressed themselves as being very negative about school. Known as the *Staying On* research project, it is supported by the ARC and NSW DEC, and includes researchers from the University of Western Sydney and Charles Sturt University. It is being conducted in nine low SES high schools across three regions of NSW. Six of the nine schools included are high-performers in terms of the retention rates they achieved. Surveys that included several measures of student engagement were completed by approximately 2000 students in Years 7, 8 and 9 and these were repeated each year for three years. Students who stated (at the beginning of the study) that they wanted to leave before Year 12 were selected for interviewing. These were interviewed each year for three years, making this study unusual in its intensive mixed-method focus on students who, at the beginning of the study, appeared most likely to dropout.

While analyses based on this research are still at an early stage, it appears that approximately one in three of the least engaged students in the survey sample became substantially more engaged with school over the three year period. A similar proportion of students in the interview sample also turned around. Some of these students simply did not like academic work and steadfastly resisted tangling with what they called the 'theory subjects'. For some of them, VETiS electives and work placements triggered a new beginning. Others needed even more intensive options, such as SBATs or part-time combinations of study and employment. There were also students whose lives were sad and complex: some carried huge domestic responsibilities; some lived in several houses with different adults and were essentially homeless; some had fathers in prison or lived with alcoholic parents. The efforts teachers made to create new hope for them were often extraordinary.

Based on preliminary findings from this research it seems likely that the next wave of reforms may need to go beyond business as usual. It may be necessary to explore new territory, or at least take existing innovations to a more developed level. The next sections draw on some case studies emerging from the *Staying On* research, as well as material from existing publications, that indicate what these reforms might involve.
1. Transition planning, tracking, and individual case management

While transition planning and various forms of case management are widespread across all jurisdictions, the quality of implementation appears to vary substantially from school to school. The level of systemic support for these activities also varies by jurisdiction. The overview provided here is not based on a comprehensive scan of every jurisdiction, so it is quite possible that some important initiatives have inadvertently been ignored. Rather, the goal here is to draw attention to some positive strategies that are making a difference in the contexts in which they are being implemented.

In Queensland there is a requirement that all students complete a Senior Education and Training (SET) Plan, which is designed to help them structure plans for Year 11 and 12 around their abilities, interests and ambitions. The plan must be developed by the end of Year 10 and must be agreed upon between the student, their parents or carers and the school. The Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) provides guidelines for parents and curriculum support materials for schools to cover this process (www.qsa.qld.edu.au/qce/set_plans). Specific decisions about how to implement SET are made at the school level, but typically, students will use the SET process to create a draft plan that includes their subject selections and their long-term goals (University admission, completion of a Certificate II or III qualification, preliminary career plans). Each student is then interviewed by a guidance officer or staff member, and advice is offered to fine-tune the plan.

SET is an important example because it is systemically supported, which means that high-quality materials are provided through the QSA, giving excellent guidance to students and supporting common understandings across the community regarding what is involved in planning for the senior years. Other systemic examples include Tasmania’s Pathways Planning and Transition Support system (www.education.tas.gov.au/pathway_planning), the Managed Individual Pathways program in Victoria, and the Flexible Learning Transitions Plans in South Australia. The latter two examples are targeted on at-risk students.

Initial pathways planning supported through materials such as SET are just the first step in a pathways management process. Unless the school leadership commits itself to regular tracking, these plans are of little use. A Queensland-based program that works with the school leadership to achieve this is being led by Dr Judy Smead from QUT. Her program involves over 100 secondary schools in a systematic tracking process; it brings together all the senior staff and Heads of Departments and middle management on a regular basis in meetings that review the progress of every student. If a student is not on track to achieve their goals (whether this is a Certificate II or completion of 20 points to qualify for University admission) a support program will be designed for that student to get him or her back on track.

The NSW Board of Studies does not provide a common SET-type template to support student planning, however many schools have developed exemplary processes to support young people’s transitions to the senior stage and to case manage those most at risk. The following example is based on research currently being conducted by the author and others, in collaboration with NSW-DEC, through the Staying On project.

Baxter High is a Year 7 to 12 school in a low SES neighbourhood in South-Western Sydney. Many of the families are first-generation immigrants; 88 percent of the parents have language backgrounds other than English and 51 percent of the families are in the lowest income quartile. At Baxter, high expectations are established from Year 7 on, and teachers
consistently stress that every student will finish Year 12. Each week the entire school staff meets for case management. Any student who is having problems is identified (photos are up on the screen), and ways of handling their problems are discussed. The goal is to ensure that students needing help do not go unnoticed and unattended. Transition planning for the senior school begins with a careers course in Year 9 that opens student’s minds to many options which, in this low SES community, would not be common knowledge at all.

During Year 10 every student develops a Portfolio. These involve detailed reflections on what students wants to do, what subjects they want to select, what they want to be, and in addition, what they will contribute to the school community during their senior years. Each student comes in for an appointment in August which is an interview with a teacher with whom the student has a relationship. Parents are also involved and are required to sign off on the Portfolio and the pathways plan it contains. The more complicated students are allocated to a staff member who will be able to counsel them about specific issues. They all come dressed as if for a job interview and take it very seriously – high heels, make up, new clothes and so on. Each student presents their portfolio and talks with the teacher about their plans.

If their plans are accepted, they are sent an official letter, personally signed by the Principal, inviting them to join Year 11. If there are problems with these plans or serious concerns about how the student might manage Year 11, they only gain a provisional passport to enter Year 11. They are placed on a contract, which is like an individual learning plan. When they start Year 11 these ‘provisional’ students meet weekly with a Transition Co-ordinator. At Baxter they have found that individual attention really makes a difference to the provisional students. Their attendance rates increase and they start to take their assessments seriously. As the Principal explains, it is working really well. The retention rate in 2011 was 83 percent and it’s getting better. Now it is half way through 2012 and only three Year 11 students have left; all three of them transitioned into an apprenticeship.

2. Senior secondary colleges

Senior secondary colleges exist in every jurisdiction, but their geographical distribution means that many students who might benefit from such institutional arrangements do not have access to them. This case study is based on research being conducted through the Staying On project. It represents one of the 18 senior-secondary or multi-campus colleges within the NSW public system.

Oregon Secondary College, Central Coast, NSW

The institutional arrangements that emerge in successful secondary colleges illustrate how this form of organisation is able to support exemplary outcomes across a diverse range of pathways. Over the past three years, Oregon SC on the NSW Central Coast has on average enrolled approximately 750 students in years 10 through 12 with approximately 200 enrolled in Year 12. The school serves a local community where many families are welfare dependent and levels of educational attainment are generally low (only 3 percent of parents have a tertiary degree). Yet the school is working successfully to raise aspirations for all students. Between 2010 and 2011 the proportion of the Year 12 class applying for and gaining a University place rose from 20 percent to 30 percent. Based on current indications and consistent with the policies the school is pursuing, the Principal believes this upward trend will continue. Oregon students who seek to gain ATAR scores and qualify for tertiary study are properly advised, but students who choose to follow vocational pathways are also carefully counselled and advised.
This is important since employers in the skilled trades and allied health areas need young people who can use technologies well and are competent in basic maths, so students following VET pathways need thorough, up-to-date advice. Oregon is committed to ensuring that every student achieves an effective transition into further education or employment; this means catering for a wide range of options.

Half way through Term 2 of Year 10 all students participate in information sessions related to subject selection, early in Term 3 they receive a booklet providing specific details about the options available, and they also attend Career Expos. After developing preliminary plans every student has a one-on-one interview with a staff member. They may choose to pursue an HSC (which may be ATAR-oriented or general), a VET-HSC pathway that maximises employment opportunities, a Trade Training pathway designed to lead to an apprenticeship, or a School-Based Apprenticeship and Traineeship (SBAT) pathway. Some students are also able to negotiate a part-time HSC in combination with a Traineeship. While Industry Curriculum Framework (ICF) courses are offered in several areas including construction, metals and engineering, entertainment, and hospitality, Oregon’s achievements in the aged care and allied health fields are outstanding. As the VET Head of Department Warwick Ryan explains, aged care is the major industry on the Central Coast. In local meetings starting four years ago, Aged Care and Private Hospital employers indicated that they needed more staff, and would be willing to employ young people and help to train them. Strong community partnerships have been built up since then connecting the school, the local TAFE, and employers. The school now has a training centre dedicated to nursing and allied health. Using this facility courses leading to Certificate II and Certificate III qualifications in Aged Care, Allied Health and Health Care Assisting are delivered by TAFE staff on the school campus.

As Warwick says, ‘...it is really, really important that we all work together just so we achieve something good for everybody. TAFE get a benefit out of it, they have got work placements for their people to go to. The school gets a benefit in that they have about 25 students basically enrolling in nursing every year.’ Some of the Age Care employers have up to 8 students at a time doing the required 105 hours of work placement, and every year these employers also offer SBAT positions. Most of the students on the nursing pathway are doing an ATAR-qualifying HSC are with an allied health or health services VET unit included in it. However, as the Staying On research project found, there are also students that have never engaged with the academic curriculum who develop a strong interest in a vocation like nursing or aged care. For them the depth and intensity of the VET offered at Oregon is important, for they can progress to a university qualification by pursuing Certificate III qualifications, while Certificate II qualifications are much more limiting.

In addition, some of the least engaged students at Oregon have stayed on at school because they have been able to combine part-time employment with their SBAT program, ultimately leading to full-time employment by age 17. Another strategy adopted with these least engaged students is to enrol them in a HSC pathway where they complete four VET units in the first half of Year 11. These arrangements are now in place for the allied health, hospitality and entertainment industries, with the goal of ensuring that if students do leave school at age 17 (for example, in the middle of Year 11) they will nevertheless have already completed a Certificate II qualification.

The institutional arrangements implemented at Oregon ensure that students can pursue VET pathways that relate to skills in demand in the local region. Strong community links have
been built with employers and the VET pathways offered are well structured and extensive. A broad and complex timetable means that students doing VET are not allocated to tracked programs. Their choices are kept open and those who make a late decision in favour of an ATAR-based HSC can usually be accommodated. The size of the Year 12 cohort combined with the intensive focus on nursing and health means that significant economies of scale have been achieved in relation to VET delivery in this area. Other VET areas of relevance to the local labour market are under development. Finally, Oregon employs a transitions adviser who operates an extensive network of contacts in regional TAFE colleges. In this way the school also caters for the interests of students who wish to pursue VET pathways that are not available within the school’s on-campus programs.

3. Extended completion and part-time senior secondary study

In recent years, there has been a growth in the numbers of young people across all jurisdictions who take more than two years to complete Year 11 and 12. In states where the subjects are organised into modules rather than year-long units of study, students may take leave for half a year, and resume after a break. Students who have dropped out are also more easily re-integrated into the modular systems, as they may return to school in mid-year rather than being excluded until the beginning of the next year. Queensland offers an interesting model of extended completion. In that state, students who have completed their SET plans register with the QSA and open a learning account. As they achieve credits towards the QCE these are banked in their account. If they have not achieved the required 20 credits by the end of Year 12, they may add to their learning account at school, or by doing approved units of study in workplace or community settings, for up to seven years after leaving school (http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au). In other states, based on rules that allow pathways to completion to extend over five years or more, students may also attend school on a part-time basis, combining study with part-time employment.

South Australia deserves close attention since it has higher levels of part-time enrolment than any other state or territory (Crafter et al 2006). In a recent study of this form of engagement in South Australia, Hodgetts and Brennan (2011) found that many students who would otherwise have left school remained connected to education because of these arrangements. Their research sample covered 14 schools. Across this sample students who reported the need for a part-time option cited a range of issues including problems at home, having left home and needing to earn money as well as study, having medical problems that made full-time school difficult, or just being too stressed by full-time study. They report that at some point over Year 11 and 12, more than half South Australia’s senior students engage with senior study in less than a full-time fashion. They also found that 30 percent of their survey sample indicated that without the option of part-time study they would simply need to drop out of school (Hodgetts & Brennan, 2011).

However, since part-time study is disproportionally undertaken by young people in poverty, it is also associated with low retention rates. Some teachers see part-time enrolments as the first step towards ‘a slide out the door’ (Hodgetts & Brennan, 2011, p. 63). In their study, the authors acknowledged the complexity of part-time study and argued that without thorough tracking and management it could become a dead end. At the same time, well structured and successful part-time programs were identified in several case study schools. These created
pathways towards school completion or apprenticeships and further training for many students who would otherwise have simply severed their connections with further learning.

4. Re-entry to senior secondary study

Institutional practices such as extended completion and re-entry to senior secondary study represent important ways in which schools are moving beyond a business as usual model. For there are students whose personal circumstances mean they must work to earn money, or take care of ailing parents or younger siblings. There are students with medical problems who may be capable of completing high school but will not manage to do this via the full-time 2-year programs that represent the taken-for-granted norm. Where poverty shapes young people’s lived experiences, there will be many who cannot juggle the multiple demands imposed on them with the intensive focus that senior studies require. There are also students who disengage from academic study and drop out only to find that without Year 12 or equivalent qualifications, they are unable achieve lives of adequate quality.

For both these groups re-entry opportunities are critically important. Again the senior colleges emerge as well placed to offer people of all ages a chance to re-establish their basic skills and resume studies leading to relevant qualifications. Senior colleges in all jurisdictions already do this, but the systemically-supported *Fast Track* program that is implemented in 10 senior colleges across Western Australia provides a useful example. *Fast Track* is an access and bridging program for students who are over 16 years of age, and are seeking to re-enter senior secondary studies, enter further education or training, or qualify for employment (see http://www.det.wa.gov.au/training). Flexible entry and exit throughout the year combined with self-paced independent learning contracts means that students who need to re-establish basic skills can use Fast Track to re-open a range of educational pathways, including completion of a Year 12 certificate.

Conclusion: Going beyond business as usual

A diverse range of institutional arrangements that are currently being implemented in schools across Australia have been discussed in this paper. In drawing attention to these positive examples, it is not assumed that all of them will be easily transferrable from one state to another. It has been argued here that challenging shifts in the contexts in which schools are operating have made it difficult to increase the proportions of students staying on beyond what appears to be a glass ceiling of 75 percent completion. It has also been argued that in order to gain further increases in high school completion rates, it may be necessary for schools and systems to engage with institutional reforms that go beyond what has been attempted hitherto.

Schools are now attempting to encourage the final and most resistant tranche of the youth population to participate in senior secondary studies. For some of these students, the carrots and sticks approach now in place, i.e., a broader curriculum that includes VET studies and restrictions on Youth Allowance that tie it educational participation, may have the desired impact. Yet as the examples discussed in this paper indicate, it may be time go beyond business as usual. It may be time to reconceptualise how we think about the young people we are concerned with. In many ways they do not and cannot conform to what we think a school student should be. For many of them, the boundaries between school, work, and family are blurred. They are not only students; they are also carers and employees, young adults with multiple responsibilities. Finally, as we reconsider who these young people are and what schools may need to do for them, it may also be time reconsider what we are asking of teachers.
and schools, especially schools in low SES regions that are doing more than their fair share of the heavy lifting.

References


Published book chapters
Juggling School and work
Chapter 8:
Juggling school and work and making the most of both

Author
Margaret H Vickers

The author gratefully acknowledges the expert research assistance of Dr Linda Finger for data analyses used here. Data presented in this chapter were collected through the Staying on at School project, conducted by researchers from the University of Western Sydney and Charles Sturt University. The project is being funded by the Australian Research Council and the NSW Department of Education and Training. Ethics approval has been granted through the University of Western Sydney – ref H6099.
Published book chapters
Neglecting evidence
Neglecting the evidence: Are we expecting too much from quality teaching?

Margaret Vickers


Abstract

Internationally, “quality teaching” and its close relatives “authentic pedagogy” and “productive pedagogy” have been enthusiastically embraced by policy-makers in education. In Australia “quality teaching” has emerged as a central strategy for boosting the nation’s scholastic performance. This chapter argues that over the past six years State and Commonwealth education ministers have tended to focus quite selectively on research findings that speak to the positive outcomes associated with quality teaching, while neglecting complexity of this field of research and the role that other factors (such as peer influences, parental involvement, or socio-geographical factors) may play. Drawing on findings from the author’s current research into student engagement in low socio-economic areas the chapter argues that the phenomenon of ‘residualisation’ in particular, whereby disadvantage is concentrated in certain public schools as a result of ‘school choice’, has quite powerful effects on the engagement and achievement of low SES students. Such evidence has, it is argued, been tacitly excluded from governments’ policy arguments.
Re-engaging young people with learning
Staying on at School research project

This brochure tells the stories of 23 students in who were decidedly negative about school when we first met them. Remarkably, all of them re-engaged with learning over the three years of our research.

They were given a real chance in life because their teachers helped them to see they were smart, showed them respect, guided them towards learning alternatives that ignited their passions, and opened new pathways to the future.

Their parents insisted that education matters and told them they cared. In our study, these were the triggers that led young people to turn around and engage with learning. These are uplifting stories of lives re-gained.
We began with students who were disengaged and followed them over three years to ascertain how and whether they changed their ideas and orientations to learning over time.
The research study

The purpose of the Staying On research project was to develop better understandings of the triggers and processes that might lead young people who were negative about school to re-connect and become engaged with learning. It was funded by the Australian Research Council and the Department of Education and Communities, and was carried out in nine New South Wales high schools over a three-year period. Since our focus was on studying student re-engagement, we began by looking for students who appeared to be decidedly disengaged. Our research was, therefore, carried out in schools where a large proportion of the students came from families where the parents' education levels and occupations suggested high levels of educational disadvantage, as measured by ICSEA scores. Of the nine schools, three were in Western Sydney, four were in rural towns and two were remote rural high schools.

In the first year of the study over 1950 students across these nine schools participated in a pencil and paper survey. These students were in Years 7, 8 and 9 when the study began, and in Years 9 10 and 11 when it finished. Using their survey responses we identified approximately 120 students who indicated that they were not enjoying school and would leave if they could. Our goal was to follow these students to ascertain how and whether they changed their ideas and orientations over time. In order to do this we sought to interview each of them, every year, for three years. All our students – those in the larger sample as well those in the interview sub-group – completed a survey each year, which meant we were able to track changes over time in the way students responded to survey questions about their enjoyment of school and their motivation to learn. Since we began with students who disliked school, it is not surprising that we lost many of them over the three years of the study. Some were absent when we visited their schools while others left school as soon as they were able.

From the initial 120 we collected a 'complete' set of data for 55 students: that is, three surveys and three interviews, over three years. These data allowed us to explore how these young people's lives changed over time. Within this sample of 55 cases, 23 students became more engaged, 13 showed no consistent change in either direction, while 19 became less engaged. It is likely that the proportion becoming less engaged is greater than this, since disengaged students were more likely to drop out. However, the positive message here is that when personal encouragement is combined with appropriate school-wide programs, at least one third of those young people who resist learning and dislike school during the early years can turn around and become successful students.

This is one of two brochures that outlines the implications of the Staying On project, providing suggestions that schools, teachers, and parents may find useful. The focus here is on the processes that may lead individuals to re-engage. In the second brochure the focus is on programs carried out in schools in order to help students develop and follow appropriate learning pathways. These may be vocational pathways that do not necessarily lead to Year 12 completion, but do lead to stable careers and often to post secondary qualifications.
Re-engaging with learning: Triggers and processes

As we pored over the stories told to us over three years, it became clear that turning around involved two steps. First, there was a conversation or an event that acted as a trigger, leading the young person to think differently about themselves. These triggers included verbal encouragement and praise; arguments about the value of education; discovering pleasure in learning a new subject or elective, and beginning to think about the need to plan their futures. Following these experiences students who did turn around re-evaluated their ideas about learning. They began to see that some forms of learning are enjoyable and that learning is a key part of preparing for their futures. For the students who became more engaged, there was a second stage that followed on from the initial experiences that had led them to change their minds. This stage entailed a commitment to steady, long-term processes that involved some or all of the following: making greater efforts at school-work, relating to teachers in a different way, making new friends at school, and constructing an education or training pathway that may be unconventional, but which could lead to a desired future. For each individual these processes were essential for sustaining a change in direction toward being a successful student.

The next section provides excerpts from our interviews that illustrate how young people’s relationships with teachers and other adults together with enlightened practices implemented in their schools can act as triggers for change.

Triggers for change

As already noted, the events that triggered change in the lives of the young people we interviewed involved conversations with friends, teachers, relatives, or other adults. They also entailed experiences based on new subjects and electives, or experiences with support programs offered by their schools.

The effect of these events was to lead young people to value education, to be more positive about themselves as learners. Most students experienced several of these events, as the triggers tend to be interdependent. For example, enrolment in a health-care elective made one student understand that she had a passion for learning in this field, but also led her to think about possible future careers.

In addition, social relationships with others played a key role, so that this student’s interactions with her friends, parents and other relatives, and with teachers all contributed to new thinking that caused her to turn around.
At the beginning of the study many of the young people we interviewed doubted their abilities and saw little reason to apply themselves at school. They rarely expected to succeed. Often, a critically important event that led them to turn around took the form of a positive comment by a teacher, praising them and telling them that they were really smart.

Erica told us that her teacher showed interest in her and provided advice on her subject choices at the Year 10 level.

I wanted to do [a Work Education elective] but the teachers said it is more for like troubled students ... They said, [it's for] ones that aren’t very academic and stuff like that.

Indirectly, the message here was that Erica was intelligent. This was the first time she perceived herself as being capable of academic success. Reflecting on this, she changed her ideas about what she might become:

I changed my mind about leaving in Year 10 ... Because even though I am not bright shit or whatever, I am average and I think I’m smarter than a hairdresser so I don’t want to settle for hairdressing if I can do more.

Another student, Ellyn, became aware that her teachers were encouraging her and she was capable of doing well.

Well the teacher, Mr H., Actually called my mum into an interview just tell her how good I was going...

Because of this she focused on pulling her grades back up and actually coming to school. Seeing yourself as capable is a fundamental starting point in the turning around process.
Valuing education

Teachers consistently try to persuade students that what they are teaching them is valuable and that education makes a difference. But most students see this as just part of the teacher’s job. Of course they believe in their subjects; why else would they teach them? What made a greater difference for the turn-around students in our study were the arguments put forward by parents, relatives, and friends.

When asked, “What made your grades better this year?” Ellyn replied…

*The boyfriend kicked me up the butt, and said I was smart. He just said, do your schoolwork! Because I want to be a teacher. And he said, if you want to do that you know, start concentrating and get away from those people that were distracting me, kind of thing.*

Dubravco’s cousins persuaded him that it was better to stay on until you are more mature.

*I would be too young if I left before (Year 12) and my cousins encouraged me to stay. They said that you would be more mature and it would be better, you would be too young if you went before Year 12.*

Several turn-around students came to see the value of education when they observed what happened to those who left early, or did not complete a school qualification. Scarlett explained her decision to stay on in these words:

*I’m not leaving (until year 12) … I’ve seen people that have left, they just turn into nothing. They don’t have a job or anything so I don’t want to turn out like that.*

Jackson made similar comments, reflecting on his parents and his family life:

*You won’t get a good life if you drop out at Year 10. You won’t get a good job because most of my family has dropped out lower than that, and they haven’t got a good job, except for my Dad.*

In our study there were many turn-around students who were influenced by their parents’ strong desires for them to complete year 12, or even continue onto University.

*Mackenzie: He (Dad) wanted me to finish Year 12, so he is proud of me.*

*Sandra: They (my parents) just want me to go to university, and I’m like, okay then.*

*Abel: Well she (Mum) knows that I don’t like school really but she wants me to finish Year 12 … That’s one thing she really wants me to do … [so] I’ve made like a vow to my Mum because she is like stressing about the whole thing. I have to finish year 12 and I have promised her I would finish. I promised myself I would finish year 12.*

There was a clear contrast between these turn-around students, whose parents told them they really cared about them finishing Year 12, and other disengaged students who did not turn around. Often, these students told us during the interviews that their parents were fine about whatever made them happy. In effect they were telling us that for their parents, finishing school did not matter if it did not make them happy. Students’ perceptions of their parents’ attitudes do matter. Parents need to tell their children that they really want them to stay on, and that they need to persist with education even if school might not always be a lot of fun.
Discovering a passion for learning

Many of the young people in our study were negative about school simply because they disliked academic subjects. When asked, ‘what do you like least about school?’ they would often say, ‘theory’, explaining that theory happens anytime you are told to sit at a desk and work with books, papers and pens.

For most students in Years 7 and 8 there was little relief from theory, except there was sport and physical education. In Years 9 and 10, life improved for these students because there were electives. In Year 11, they had the chance to choose their own subjects. The subjects they enjoyed the most were food technology, photography, drama, music, woodwork and engineering.

As she started year 11, Candice explained that things had improved:

This year I like school more because I’m choosing my own subjects and I’m doing what I want. I am doing Business Studies, Legal Studies, English, Exploring Early Childhood and Food Technology... I did not choose to do Maths.

For some students, such as Andelko, being good at an elective subject can trigger a positive relationship to learning:

I am good at drawing for example, good enough that one of my teachers told me that I am good enough for architectural work. It’s a good job.

Following the realisation that he was actually good at something, Andelko went on to say:

I have started paying attention in maths again. Last year I just didn’t pay attention I didn’t like it ... I mainly bludged. Then I started paying attention again, at the very end of the year, so I passed. If I pay attention then I will get 60s or 70s and I could probably do almost anything if I paid attention and made some effort.

Several turn-around students discovered a passion for learning through vocational education in school (VETiS) subjects, either within the school or at a TAFE College. The larger story here relates to students who pursued pathways that took them from school to work, or carried them on to post secondary qualifications. Some of these students completed school-based apprenticeships (SBATs) while others completed a series of VET certificates that qualified them for admission to a TAFE program. These cases are described in greater detail in the Staying On project’s second brochure.
Thinking about the future

It could be assumed that young people will naturally focus on their futures as they grow older. Our interviews suggested, however, that such self-reflection was far from automatic or inevitable. The young people who did become more engaged explained to us that they had usually been pushed towards thinking about life after school. This pushing may come from parents, other relatives, or from transition planning processes conducted by the school.

In Brian’s case it was his mother who pushed him. In the first two years of his discussions with us Brian did not mention any discussions with his parents about future plans, but in his final interview he said:

She (Mum) just said ‘You better pull your finger out this year and get a bit done.’ She’s always asking what I’m going to do when I leave Year 12 and trying to egg me on to push me towards some things.

Stephen had been encouraged by his uncle:

My uncle is a teacher, he talks to me about it a bit but not much though. But kind of got me thinking that I should start thinking about a job and career.

The next section discusses the processes involved in sustaining and developing young people’s engagement with school. A key part of this involves developing students’ ways of imagining their futures, and creating concrete plans for setting out the learning pathways that will take them into these futures.

Processes for re-engagement: Sustaining the change

The 23 young people who re-engaged with learning over the three years of our study all described specific moments, specific events or specific conversations that led them to think differently about themselves and about school. These events have been described in the first half of this brochure. These were the triggers; the first steps towards re-engaging and becoming successful students. However, these triggers needed to be followed by longer-term commitments to new habits of learning and new ways of relating to others. Our turn-around students frequently spoke of creating more respectful relationships with teachers, of working harder and making a greater effort with schoolwork, of changing their friends, or of relating to their friends in a different way. These processes are described in this section.

New friends and new ways of being friends

Many of the students we conversed with in the first year of our research had friends who skipped class or truanted. For years they had colluded with them in resistance against academic work. For the students who turned around, the continuing influence of these old friends was quite challenging. Something had to be done to break the pattern. Jackson made a clean break, a dramatic shift from the past:

Oh I started to hang out with the wrong group last year. So I decided to hang out with a better group ... I just saw like how their lives were turning out, half of them have dropped out of school already, and I wanted to stay at school and finish school. So I just dropped it all and changed all of my friends. I had to change a lot myself to fit in with them. I had to cutback on swearing, I used to swear a lot. I’ve stopped swearing. I stopped bullying people and then they decided that I [had] changed and I became a good friend[s] with them ... with a lot of them actually.

Jackson’s decision involved significant courage and demanded a commitment to personal change. In our study we found that teachers often supported students like Jackson by encouraging them to change their peer networks. They did this in various ways – such as by changing seating arrangements, class composition or group formations for class activities.

In the first year of the study, Shane talked about spending lunch time with his friends playing handball and talking about movies and football. In the final year he talked...
about friends being important because they help you get through school. He said that he needed to ‘Settle down a bit this year ... put me head down and work’. He purposefully moved away from peers who he said got him into trouble, and chose new friends at the start of school year.

Another student, Charles, was asked ‘So what would be the most important issue to you and your friends at present?’ To which he replied ‘Succeeding at school’. He went on to say that what he did at recess and lunch, was ‘talk to people, I guess study together and stuff. Share study notes, learn what they’ve learnt’. In summary, while some of the students who re-engaged with school separated from their old friends and formed completely new friendship groups, for others the direction taken involved creating new ways of being friends, by establishing a change in the focus of peer activities.

Respectful relationships with teachers
An important part of the Staying On study involved interviews with teachers and school principals. These indicated that the schools within which we worked placed a strong emphasis on showing respect towards all students. Over time, this paid off.

One student explained his change in attitude by telling us that ‘... Teachers are human too. If I want them to respect me, then I have to respect them’. Often the students who turned around explained that they used to have teachers who were mean, and who didn't like them. David, for example, told us in the third year of the study that he liked school better than in the previous years because the teachers were better. He saw the teachers as nicer, more helpful, and not yelling any more. They would come around and ask if he needed help. Another student, Lachlan, explained it as follows:

Like all the teachers are great. They treat you with the same respect as you give them. Yeah, everything is fine.

At one of our participating schools -- Angland high school -- the creation of these respectful relationships was achieved by targeting students with special needs during staff meetings. Each week the entire school staff at Angland met for case management. Student photos were projected on the screen and a description of the issues affecting the student was presented. Ways of handling individual student problems were discussed, with the intention of ensuring that any student needing help did not go unnoticed or unsupported. Sustaining respectful relationships between students and teachers is an ongoing and central part of the re-engagement process.
Putting more effort into schoolwork

It is self-evident and obvious to say that in order to sustain the change, students who re-engage with learning must put more effort into schoolwork. Many of the processes already described naturally contribute to this outcome. For example, when Andelko realised that he was a capable student, he started paying attention again. He then made the judgement that he could probably achieve almost anything if he made the effort. In a similar case, Ellyn decided that if she was going to become a teacher she needed to start concentrating, and get away from the people who were distracting her.

In Jackson’s case, there were again some complex challenges. He had been working most nights of the week at McDonald’s:

I would go from home in the morning at 6, catch the bus to school, catch a bus to work, work to 11, catch the bus back home, then – yeah, it is so sleep depriving. I hardly handed in an assignment because I could never get them done. I was always truanting from school which made it worse, so I just decided I’d quit my job and I’d stay at school.

He decided that finishing school and then seeking employment make more sense than attempting to juggle study and work. In almost every case, students who turned around and started to value education more, started to see themselves as capable, and as a consequence, put more energy into their academic work.

There is one more process that is essential to sustaining re-engagement, and that is the construction of concrete pathways from school to work or further study. This important and complex process is the topic of the second Staying On brochure.
Conclusion

While there have been decades of research on the processes of dropping out of school, the Staying On project has broken new ground. Unlike most other studies, we specifically recruited young people who were actually disengaged during their early high school years (Years 7, 8 and 9). We committed our research activities to understanding how these young people can be turned around. We found that at least one third of the disengaged students in our study did become successful students over the three years in which we were able to meet and talk with them. This is a very encouraging outcome. We hope that the triggers and processes we have identified and described here will provide guidance for parents and teachers as they seek to help young people re-engage with learning.

For experienced teachers, many of the ideas presented here will seem familiar. That is not surprising. What it tells us is that the steady and consistent work teachers do makes an enormous difference. Quite simply, it needs to be done again, and again.
The Staying on at School Project

The Staying on at School project was carried out by staff from the UWS, CSU and the Department of Education and Communities (DEC) between 2009 and 2012. It was supported by grants from DEC & the Australian Research Council.

Ethics approval was sought from and approved by two separate organisations: the University of Western Sydney Ethics Review Committee (Human Subjects); and the DEC.

Throughout this brochure, pseudonyms have been used in place of the names of all students, teachers and schools.

Nine secondary schools including urban, regional and remote rural schools from across NSW participated in the project. All these schools had socio-economic characteristics associated with low rates of high school completion, but most of the participating schools were performing above expectations.

The researchers sincerely thank all these schools for their support over the years.

Further reading


Going On: Pathways to employment and post-secondary study

Staying on at School research project

This is the second brochure based on the results of the Staying on at School research project. In the first brochure we told the stories of young people who resisted education and wanted to leave school, but who later turned around and stayed on to complete Year 12.

This brochure tells the stories of a different group. These young people never committed themselves to completing Year 12, but nor did they walk away from further learning. With encouragement from their parents, friends and teachers and with support from employers, they gained experiences that opened their minds and ignited their passions. Toward the end of our study these young people were gaining work experience and completing vocational qualifications designed to create pathways to secure employment.
We also found that there was another group of students who, although they did start to engage positively with learning, told us that they never really enjoyed school.
The Staying on Research project

The Staying on at School project was carried out by staff from the University of Western Sydney, Charles Sturt University and the Department of Education and Communities between 2009 and 2012. It was supported by grants from the Department of Education and Communities & the Australian Research Council.

As explained in our first brochure [Staying On #1] the purpose of our research was to gain a better understanding of the processes that might lead young people who are negative about school to re-engage with learning. The research was funded by the Australian Research Council and the Department of Education and Communities, and was carried out in nine New South Wales high schools over a three-year period.

We began our study by looking for students who appeared to be particularly disengaged with school. Based on the responses of the 1,950 students who completed our initial survey we identified approximately 120 of them who indicated that they were not enjoying school and would leave if they could. We talked with each of these students each year for three years. Many of them never did re-engage with learning. They had a difficult time at school, were often bullied, and thought that their teachers were not helpful. They did not like school subjects, particularly those that they considered to be “theoretical”, such as mathematics, science, and history. When asked about the future, they mostly told us they had no idea what they wanted to do.

At least one in three of the students we met with each year did re-engage. Some of them even started to like school and these stayed on to complete year 12, as explained in our first brochure. Yet we also found that there was another group of students who, although they did start to engage positively with learning, told us that never really enjoyed school. This second brochure focuses on them. It describes the school programs that helped these students identify and follow appropriate learning pathways. These may be vocational pathways that do not necessarily lead to Year 12 completion, but do lead to stable careers and often to post secondary qualifications. This brochure also discusses what our research found about the essential work of transition support teachers and the participation of parents and employers in helping young people define appropriate education and career pathways.
Adela’s story

At the beginning of Term 3 when she was about to turn 18, Adela left school to take up a full-time position with Oregon Aged Care (OAC). To qualify for this position, she had completed over 100 days of work at the OAC, had gained a Certificate III in Health Services Assistance, and also a Certificate III in Aged Care. She had clear plans for her future: employment as an aged care assistant at OAC would not be the end of her professional career. We talked about her plans just before she left school, and she told me she intended to go on to University and become a Registered Nurse.

How did a young person who started out not liking school reach this point? When we first met Adela, it seemed quite unlikely that she would pursue a pathway towards further learning and professional qualifications. When she was in Year 8, she wanted to leave school as soon as she could, telling us she would rather be working than staying on at school. When she was in Year 9, she decided that it would be better to become a qualified nurse rather than leaving early. Her older sister, who was working as an assistant at OAC, had urged her to aim for a nursing degree rather than settling for a job as a health care assistant. Adela assumed that this would mean completing Year 12 and entering a University.

However, as she entered Year 9 she faced a serious setback. She had failed maths in Year 8, and at Oregon High, this meant placement in a lower stream from Year 9 onwards. When she was in Year 10, she entered what she described as an ‘average stream’ at Oregon Secondary College. However, she was clearly struggling with academic subjects. Like many of the students we met in our study, she hated ‘theory’. We asked her about the most difficult subjects at her school, and she said:

... like English ... I just can’t do it, because ... I get confused like with commas and I can’t spell. ... with maths I understand it until I come to a test and then it just goes all out of my brain.

As she told us, the best thing that happened in Year 10 was that a mentor from the Youth Connections program helped her secure a work experience placement at the Oregon General Hospital. She found this work compelling. Adela then moved on from Year 10 to Year 11 with a clear desire to qualify in nursing. However, she was not at all confident about completing the sequence of academic subjects that would lead her to gain an HSC and a university admission score that would get her into the University program. She needed an unconventional pathway from where she was to where she wanted to be.

The insightful work of Warwick Ryan, Oregon’s VET Department Head, gave her the break she needed. He enrolled Adela in a School Based Apprenticeship and Traineeship (SBAT) program, combined with a plan for a five-year HSC Pathway. By the end of Term 2 in Year 11, Adela had dropped most of her academic subjects. She took an Industry Curriculum Framework course, contracted for additional work experience, and completed a program (delivered by TAFE instructors at Oregon Secondary College) that allowed her to gain two Certificate III qualifications over the next 12 months. Three weeks before she took up her full-time job at Oregon aged care, we had a final conversation, looking back over her school years and looking forward toward her future plans. Referring to the first half of Year 11, she recalled:

I was still going on with my studies. But I wasn’t doing any good at them at all.
She explained what it was about these subjects that turned her off learning them:

*I like learning but it depends what the environment and everything is ... I didn’t really like stuff that I thought that I didn’t need to go into the workforce.*

She was already working at Oregon Aged Care four days a week and was proud to be taking up a full-time position. Here’s how she described it in answer to our questions.

**Q:** And what kind of work do you do?

**Adela:** You get them up in the morning, shower them, and you help them with their activities of daily living, stuff they can’t do any more. Lunch, we prepare lunch and dinners and stuff like that.

**Q:** Do you enjoy it?

**Adela:** I love it.

Looking towards the future she said:

*I want to do that [work at OAC] for a few years to be able to save up money and everything and then I want to get into uni as a mature aged student and do my RN.*

In Adela’s case, success involved going on with learning what she cared about, without having to stay on and finish Year 12. Supported by her school, she had found a different pathway. In our research we discovered numerous Adela’s across the nine schools we worked in. These are young men and women who will reliably engage in learning provided that it is related in a practical way to their passions and career interests. The next section of this pamphlet explains how Oregon Secondary College caters for young people like these.
Oregon Secondary College on the NSW Central Coast serves a local community where many families are welfare dependent and levels of educational attainment are generally low (only 3 percent of parents have a tertiary degree). Yet the school is working successfully to raise aspirations for all students. Between 2010 and 2013 the proportion of the Year 12 class applying for and gaining a University place rose from 20% to 35%. Based on current indications and consistent with the policies the school is pursuing, the Principal believes this upward trend will continue. While Oregon students who seek to gain ATAR scores are encouraged, students who choose to follow vocational pathways are also well supported. Oregon is committed to ensuring that every student achieves an effective transition into further education or employment; this means catering for a wide range of options.

Early in Term 3 all students receive a Course Selection Booklet which is discussed in class and through additional information sessions and Career Expos. After developing their preliminary study plans, every student has a one-on-one interview with a staff member. Students may choose to pursue an HSC (which may be ATAR-oriented or general), a VET-HSC pathway that maximises employment opportunities, a Trade Training pathway designed to lead to an apprenticeship, or an SBAT pathway. Some students are also able to negotiate a part-time HSC in combination with a Traineeship. While Industry Curriculum Framework (ICF) courses are offered in several areas including construction, metals and engineering, entertainment, and hospitality, Oregon’s achievements in the aged care and allied health fields are outstanding.
As the VET Head of Department Warwick Ryan explains, aged care is ***the*** major industry on the Central Coast. In local meetings starting six years ago, Aged Care and Private Hospital employers indicated that they needed more staff, and would be willing to employ young people and help to train them. Strong community partnerships have been built up since then connecting the school, the local TAFE, and employers. The school now has a training centre dedicated to nursing and allied health, where courses leading to Certificate II and Certificate III qualifications are delivered by TAFE staff on the school campus.

As Warwick says, ‘...it is really, really important that we all work together just so we achieve something good for everybody. TAFE get a benefit out of it, they have got work placements for their people to go to. The school gets a benefit in that they have about 25 students basically enrolling in nursing every year.’ Some of the Age Care employers have up to 8 students at a time doing the required 105 hours of work placement, and every year these employers also offer SBAT positions. Most of the students on the nursing pathway are doing an ATAR-qualifying HSC with an allied health or health services VET unit included in it.

However, as our research project found, there are also students, like Adela, who have difficulties with the academic curriculum but develop a strong interest in a vocation like nursing or aged care. For them the depth and intensity of the VET offered at Oregon is important, for they can progress to a university qualification by pursuing Certificate III qualifications and then entering a University with some advance credits. Certificate II qualifications are much more limiting as they are not accepted as a qualification for entrance to a University.
In addition, some of the least engaged students at Oregon have stayed on at school because they are been able to combine part-time employment with their SBAT program, ultimately leading to full-time employment by age 17. Another strategy adopted with these least engaged students is to enrol them in an HSC pathway where they complete four VET courses in the first half of Year 11, deferring enrolment in academic courses. These arrangements are now in place for nursing and hospitality and the entertainment industries, with the goal of ensuring that if students do leave school at age 17 (for example, in the middle of Year 11) they will nevertheless have already completed at least a Certificate II qualification.

Not all secondary schools are able to offer the intensive forms of VET that are a feature of Senior High Schools and Secondary Colleges. It is nevertheless possible for comprehensive high schools to offer transition programs that provide excellent support for both academic and vocationally-oriented students, as this case study of Angland comprehensive high school shows.

**To conclude:**
The institutional arrangements on offer at Oregon ensure that students can pursue VET pathways that relate to skills in demand in the local region. Strong community links have been built with employers and the VET pathways offered are well structured and extensive. A broad and complex timetable means that students doing VET are not tracked. Their choices are kept open and those who make a late decision in favour of an ATAR-based HSC can usually be accommodated. The size of the Year 12 cohort combined with the intensive focus on nursing and health means that significant economies of scale have been achieved in relation to VET delivery in this area. Other VET areas of relevance to the local labour market are under development. Oregon also employs a transitions adviser who operates an extensive network of contacts in regional TAFE colleges. In this way the school also caters for the interests of students who wish to pursue pathways that are not represented in the school program.
Transition planning and support at Angland High School

The South Western Sydney Region includes many areas of severe socio-economic disadvantage, so it comes as no surprise that many of the secondary schools in this region have quite low retention rates. Angland high school stands out as an exception, even though its demographic profile speaks to the challenges that this school community faces. Many of the families who send their children to Angland are first-generation immigrants; 88 percent of the parents have language backgrounds other than English and 51 percent of the families are in the lowest income quartile.

Conversations with the school Principal and several teaching staff pointed towards particular features of the school – both practices and policies - that contribute to the exceptional results it gains. There was a lot of discussion around showing respect: the teachers show respect to the students, and over time they win respect back. One student explained his change in attitude by telling us that "... teachers are human too. If I want them to respect me, then I have to respect them". Respect becomes ubiquitous.

In addition to this, the teachers also maintain a well-targeted focus on individual student needs. Each week the entire school staff meets for case management. Any student who is having problems is identified (their photos are up on the screen). Ways of handling their problems are discussed. The goal is to ensure that any student needing help does not go unnoticed and unsupported.

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Another important feature of Angland is the transition planning process, which is designed to help Year 10 students develop plans for the senior years based on their abilities, interests and ambitions. At Angland, high expectations are established from Year 7 on, and teachers consistently stress that every student will finish Year 12. Transition planning for the senior school begins with a careers course in Year 9 that opens student’s minds to many options which, in this low SES community, would not be common knowledge to many students at all.

During Year 10 every student develops a Portfolio. These involve detailed reflections on what students want to do, what subjects they want to select, what they want to be, and in addition, what they will contribute to the school community during their senior years. Each student comes in for an appointment in August which is an interview with a teacher with whom the student has an established relationship. Parents are also involved and are required to sign off on the Portfolio and the pathways plan it contains. The more complicated students are allocated to a staff member – the Transitions Coordinator who will be able to counsel them about specific issues.

All the students come in on Portfolio day dressed as if for a job interview. They take it very seriously – high heels, make up, new clothes and so on. Each student presents their portfolio and talks with the teacher about their plans. If their plans are accepted, they are sent an official letter, personally signed by the Principal, inviting them to join Year 11. If there are problems with their plans or serious concerns about how the student might manage Year 11, they only gain a provisional passport to enter Year 11. They are placed on a contract, which is like an individual learning plan.

When they start Year 11 these ‘provisional’ students meet each week with a Transition Co-ordinator, and there is a meeting once each term that includes the student, his or her parent(s) and the Transition Coordinator. At Angland the staff have found that individual attention and parental involvement really make a difference to the provisional students. As they progress though the Year 11 process, their attendance rates increase, they start to take their assessments seriously, and they do not drop out.

As the Principal explains, this transition planning and support program is working really well. The retention rate to Year 12 at Angland HS in 2013 reached 90 percent. It has been getting better each year. This places Angland HS well ahead of similar schools in the South-Western Sydney region. In addition, Angland is a school that seeks to ensure that those who leave continue to engage with learning pathways, including well-supported transitions into apprenticeship programs.

To conclude: Angland HS is a large comprehensive high school that achieves outstanding results in terms of overall retention rates, as well as exemplary rates of student progression into further and higher education. Its success is strongly underpinned by a culture of respect, together with parental involvement and well targeted programs of individual case management and transition planning.
Conclusion

While there have been decades of research on the processes of dropping out of school, the Staying On project has broken new ground. Unlike most other studies, we specifically recruited young people who were actually disengaged during their early high school years (Years 7, 8 and 9). We committed our research activities to understanding how these young people can be turned around. We found that at least one third of the disengaged students in our study did become successful students over the three years in which we were able to meet and talk with them.

This is a very encouraging outcome. In this brochure the focus is on supporting re-engagement through the construction of concrete pathways from school to work or further study. We hope that the processes we have identified and described here will provide guidance for parents and teachers as they seek to help young people re-engage with learning.

For experienced teachers, many of the ideas presented here may seem familiar. That is not surprising. What it tells us is that the steady and consistent work teachers do makes an enormous difference. Quite simply, it needs to be done again, and again.

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The material in this brochure may be cited as follows:


The Staying on at School Project

The Staying on at School project was carried out by staff from the UWS, CSU and the Department of Education and Communities (DEC) between 2009 and 2012. It was supported by grants from DEC & the Australian Research Council.

Ethics approval was sought from and approved by two separate organisations: the University of Western Sydney Ethics Review Committee (Human Subjects); and the DEC.

Throughout this brochure, pseudonyms have been used in place of the names of all students, teachers and schools.

Nine secondary schools including urban, regional and remote rural schools from across NSW participated in the project. All these schools had socio-economic characteristics associated with low rates of high school completion, but most of the participating schools were performing above expectations.

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Further reading


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