



Engagement in Learning

Glenelg Shire

Final Report 15 December 2020



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Prepared for:

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Abbreviations

AEI	Australian Education Index
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
ARACY	Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
BP3	Budget Paper No. 3 (Service Delivery Targets – Murrung)
BtBGSC	Beyond the Bell Great South Coast
CASS	Centre for Childhood Studies (Faculty of Education, Monash University)
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CUST	Cultural Understanding and Safety Training
DET	Department of Education and Training (Victoria)
ERIC	Education Resources Information Center
ERP	Estimated Resident Population
GLAG	Glenelg Local Action Group
GSC	Great South Coast
HOL	Hands On Learning Program
ICANs	Innovative Community Action Networks
KESOs	Koori Engagement Support Officers
MCRI	Murdoch Children’s Research Institute
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy Report
SBCP	School Breakfast Club Program
SEIFA	Socio Economic Indexes for Areas
SEHQ	School Entrant Health Questionnaire
SS2S	Stepping Stones to School
TAL	Team Around the Learner
VAAF	Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2013-2018
VCAMS	Victorian Child and Adolescent Monitoring System
YCDI	You Can Do It (program)

Summary

This report is the outcome of the second phase of the Engagement in Learning Project of the Glenelg Local Action Group Beyond the Bell. The first phase entailed the development of an Issues Paper with key findings from research into early disengagement in primary school, summarising the key findings on contributing factors and successful strategies in rural communities. The second phase comprised a comprehensive consultation with key stakeholders. The next phase will entail consultation with students, parents, and families.

This report is intended to be read in conjunction with the Issues Paper. Whilst this document provides a summary of the literature findings, it is an adjunct document to the Issues Paper.

Thirty stakeholders participated in consultations over 5 weeks. The consultations comprised mostly of interviews undertaken by a small team of community facilitators with local networks and links with stakeholders. A small number of stakeholders opted to complete an online survey.

Stakeholders were mostly school principals (10) from a range of schools across the shire and included other staff and related agencies such as the Department of Education and Training, OzChild, Anglicare and Victoria Police.

Most stakeholders agreed that disengagement was an issue that appears to be worsening. The stakeholder view confirms the data for Glenelg with higher absenteeism rates, emotional and behavioural issues, academic progress, and achievement as measured by NAPLAN and connection to peers and schools. These data sets were selected as indicators of engagement and disengagement. Some stakeholders also observed that online learning and time away from school has also impacted on student engagement this term (Term 4, 2020).

Stakeholders identified several indicators of potential disengagement; however, the dominant factor was their behaviour. This included any or some of the following: being disruptive, quiet and withdrawn, not participating, attitudes and lacking friendship groups. The literature discussed the factors as being multi-dimensional and interrelated, with no one indicator that measures disengagement.

Although there was no stakeholder consensus on the ages or stages of disengagement, there was mention of the transition period between grades 2 and grade 3 / 4. The literature also mentions

the middle years (grades 4-6) coinciding with the onset of adolescence. Further research is necessary to get a better understanding of this issue.

Stakeholders identified three interrelated dimensions of the factors or causes of engagement as disconnection: Individual factors; School factors; and Family factors.

Stakeholders also had diverse views on the elements of good engagement within three broad interrelated domains: School; Programs; Relationships. These are broadly consistent with the views contained in the literature, although the literature emphasised the multifaceted nature of factors with complex relationships between them.

According to the literature, teachers mostly viewed the causes of disengagement as within the family, whereas the findings of the stakeholders in this project identified the importance of the family and the school setting and particularly on relationships (teachers and peers).

The perspectives and views of students, parents and families in the Glenelg Shire would provide a more complete and balanced understanding of disengagement factors.

Both the literature and stakeholder views agreed that any interventions, approaches, or models implemented to address engagement / disengagement should be context based and tailored to suit the individual school and community setting. Some of the more successful interventions mentioned in the literature and stakeholder consultations included: Hands On Learning; Cultural Education and Training; Restorative Practice; Positive Education Approach; Respectful Relationships; Berry Street Education Model; and Standing Tall. Stepping Stones 2 School was also mentioned as a successful intervention in the early years that could be expanded into primary school. There has also been some experience of each of these in some of the schools in the Glenelg Shire.

A whole of school approach and building a culture that engages students was also identified in the literature as a protective factor in preventing disengagement. This was also the view of stakeholders. Cultural safety for Koori students can be achieved through the undertaking of CUST training by schools' staff, undertaking a cultural audit and through the implementation of the Gunditjmara Language and Cultural Program by all students.

Stakeholders confirmed that a whole of school approach needs all staff trained and on board with the philosophy for it to succeed. The associated costs can be prohibitive. Although many schools

across the Glenelg Shire are implementing a range of programs and approaches, stakeholders highlighted the need to focus on the student teacher and peer to peer relationships for successful student engagement.

Other prominent themes from the stakeholder engagement included:

- The impacts on teachers, support staff and other students.
- The complexity and difficulty and associated heartbreak of ‘real life’ cases
- The role of gaming and technology in absenteeism and non-attendance
- Sense of frustration with the perceived lack of communication with some out of school agencies and government departments
- The need for more wellbeing staff / chaplains
- Support of Principals Network
- The need to intervene and identify those at risk early

The many ways that the stakeholders attempted to keep students engaged was remarkable and inspiring. As one respondent noted “I am always thinking about it, even when out jogging”. There is clearly a passion and energy to do something about it.

Introduction

[Beyond the Bell Great South Coast](#) (BtBGSC) is a collaboration of agencies, organisations, schools, and communities working across six Council areas in south west Victoria to achieve the vision that our community is a leader in working together to enable our young people to succeed. School engagement and completion have been identified as key factors for the wellbeing of our young people.

Each council area has a local action group working together on the issues relevant to their communities. The Glenelg Local Action Group (GLAG) operates in the Glenelg Shire in the far south west of the State of Victoria. The issue of early disengagement by students at primary school was identified through consultation with key stakeholders including school principals, primary school teachers, Year 7 transition staff, welfare staff, specialist support services and Koori Engagement Support Officers (KESOs). Consequently, philanthropic funding from the State Trustees Australia Foundation has been provided to undertake research and gain greater understanding of the issue. It is planned to seek further funding to undertake consultation with students, parents and families in the third phase of this project.

ASK Consulting Victoria was engaged by the GLAG to undertake a deep dive into early disengagement from primary school in the Glenelg Shire. This part of the project was subsequently undertaken in two phases. The first phase comprised a document and data review summarising key findings on contributing factors and successful strategies culminating in an Issues Paper. The second phase comprised consultation with key stakeholders (principals, teachers, support staff and related agencies). This report is a collation of key findings from the Issues Paper and stakeholder consultation and includes recommendations.

Setting the scene – Glenelg Shire

Located in the southwest corner of Victoria on Gunditjmara, Bunganditj and Jardwadjali country, the Glenelg Shire is one of Victoria's largest geographical areas. Covering a land area of approximately 6,212 sq. kilometres, with a population of 19,759 (ERP Census 2016), the shire is about 360 kilometres from the Melbourne CBD.

Portland is the Shire's main regional centre with 55% of the total population. The district towns of Casterton and Heywood comprise 9% and 8.8% of the total population,

respectively. The remaining balance of the total population (27.2%) live within the smaller settlements including Bolwarra, Dartmoor, Merino, and other smaller rural communities.

Portland is 4.5 hours by road from Melbourne and 6 hours from Adelaide. The Glenelg Shire is one of the more remote and geographically isolated council areas in Victoria, with a population density of approximately 3.2 people per square kilometre, (compared with a density of 23.9 for Victoria). Travelling time of 1.5 hours between Portland and Casterton in the north of the shire presents difficulties in service provision and the ability to work together as a unified community.

Glenelg Shire has a higher proportion of ATSI people; has higher rates of people with a disability; higher rates of early school leaving and disengagement for 15 to 24-year old; and higher rates of family violence. The shire is one of the more remote and geographically isolated council areas in Victoria and is among the 14% of most disadvantaged council areas in the state.

Methodology

A mixed method approach has been used for this project with both quantitative and qualitative methods.

This project has been undertaken in two parts:

1. Document review which included a desktop review of published literature, collation and analysis of relevant data, and a review of other relevant documents (e.g., DET policy, plans, etc.). An issues paper was developed as part of this phase
2. Consultation phase which entailed interviews and surveys of key stakeholders (school staff, relevant support organisations and DET staff). The findings from the stakeholder consultation are included in this report.

It should be noted that a further round of consultations with students, young people, parents and families is planned to be undertaken in the next phase of this project, dependant on funding.

Document Review

The document review was undertaken in the first part of this project and the findings included in the Issues Paper – an adjunct document to this report.

A critical analysis was undertaken of published literature to provide background information and to identify key terms, concepts and findings of peer reviewed research relating to student disengagement in primary school with a focus on schools in rural and regional Victoria.

An online search was also undertaken to identify other related documents and information such as unpublished research, research in progress, and related reports.

A review of government policy, strategy and planning was also undertaken to identify current and potential areas of focus by government.

Consultation

Stakeholder consultation was undertaken in the second phase of the project with the finding provided later in this report.

Consultation was undertaken with primary school principals, teachers, support staff, transition staff (into year 7), welfare staff, specialist services, KESOs, and relevant DET staff. Some other stakeholders (e.g. Navigator Program staff, and Ozchild Stepping Stones to School Program staff) were identified through the consultation process and were subsequently included in the consultation.

Consultation targets included:

- **Teaching staff** – 20 staff interviewed or participants in focus groups (20 staff = approximately 20% of total number of EFT teaching staff at primary schools in Glenelg)
- **Primary school principals** – 5 interviewed or participants in focus groups
- **Secondary school staff** – 5 (including transition officers, year 7 coordinators and junior school principals)
- **Specialist staff** (including KESOs, welfare, counsellors, etc) – 5
- **DET regional staff** – 3 (health, wellbeing, and specialist services)

The consultation also sought geographic representation from across the shire, a mix of government and non-government schools, larger and smaller schools, schools with a diversity of students, and schools with varying degrees of disadvantage and advantage.

A small team of local people with existing relationships or links with schools and relevant stakeholders was recruited by the Beyond the Bell Glenelg Local Action Group to undertake stakeholder interviews. Consultations were undertaken over the period 26 October to 6 November 2020.

An online survey was also developed to capture the views of stakeholders who were unable to participate in interviews.

Stakeholder Engagement

An introductory email was distributed to all school principals and relevant stakeholders by the Chair of the GLAG in mid-September, providing an overview of the project and inviting them to participate. Many indicated their availability via Doodle Poll and Community Facilitators followed up with appointments and scheduling of interviews.

A total of 17 interviews with 24 participants were conducted over the 5-week period 26 October to 12 November. In addition, 6 surveys were completed online. In all, 30 people participated in the consultation, with at least one participant known to have completed both survey and interview.

Participants were predominantly school principals (10) and other related stakeholders (DET, OzChild, Police and Anglicare). The principals were from a range of schools including rural and remote, primary and secondary, and schools with varying degrees of disadvantage.

Limitations

The timing of the surveys coincided with the beginning of the 4th School Term, with many teachers and principals feeling overwhelmed with recommencement of classes following a term where most students had been undertaking online learning off campus. Hence, it was difficult for many to find the time to participate.

As the prime feedback came from school principals rather than teachers, this may have skewed the data to a more systems view of the disengagement issue rather than an experiential or classroom view. It was observed that *“classroom teachers can provide more breadth to this study and can bring an understanding of what happens in the classroom.”* Some principals indicated that there was not a problem in their school since their involvement and may have played down some of the effects. However, given that most schools are small, many principals are involved at the coalface and know each of the students at their schools.

Results and Findings

Summary of Document Review

A literature and document review were undertaken prior to the consultation with stakeholders and the results included in the Issues Paper (an adjunct document to this report). A summary of the reviews is included below.

Government and policy context

A review of government policy, strategy and planning was undertaken to identify current and potential piece areas of focus by government. The review also identified where some of the work being undertaken at state and national government levels to improve educational outcomes aligns with this project. Documents reviewed included:

[*Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Education Declaration*](#)

[*COAG National Education Reform Agreement*](#)

[*The Education State*](#)

[*Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students: Recommendations for the Minister of Education on improving educational outcomes for students in Rural and Regional Victoria*](#)

[*Marrung: Aboriginal Educational Plan*](#)

The review identified some state and national government work aimed at improving educational outcomes for young people and recognise that success in primary school provides a strong foundation for later. They also recognise and prioritise the following factors:

- working with parents, carers and families
- disadvantaged families
- the middle years (Years 4-6) and transition points
- ATSI families

They also acknowledge the importance of student engagement, aspiration and mental health / resilience to learning achievement.

Literature review

There is an overwhelming amount of literature on secondary school disengagement and the many programs and activities designed to improve student retention, however there is less available focussed on primary school. There is even less available relating to Victoria, and rural and remote areas.

The review undertaken for the Issues Paper concentrated on the primary school years from prep to grade 6 and on the transition from year 6 to 7 in secondary school. It summarised the research relating to student engagement and disengagement, including the associated factors, concepts, as well as programs and practices designed to address the issues.

Student engagement and disengagement crosses various disciplines and fields, therefore literature searches were undertaken across the fields of education, psychology and social sciences. Searches included academic databases as well as online searches for 'grey literature'.

What does the literature say about the importance of school engagement?

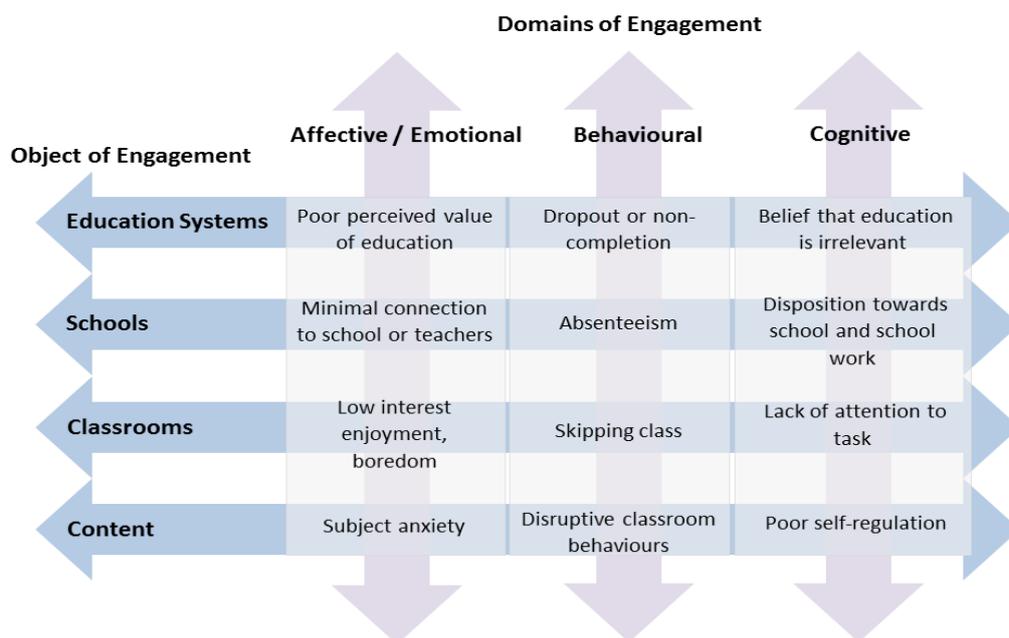
In summary, academics and researchers generally agree that disengagement is both an outcome and a long process over time. It is important as it not only relates to school success but is also related to employment, income, health and social outcomes. Young people who are disengaged are at greater risk of homelessness, substance abuse, mental health issues, incarceration, and even suicide.

What does the literature say about the concepts of 'disengagement' and 'engagement'?

A review of the literature indicates that the construct or meaning of 'disengagement' is complex, nuanced, and multifaceted. The terms 'engagement' and 'disengagement' are both used in the literature along with other terms such as 'truancy', 'school dropout', 'disaffection', 'connectedness', 're-engagement', etc. It is also discussed in many different disciplines including psychology, sociology, and education. There does not seem to be any single agreed on definition as it is described and measured in many ways.

Nonetheless, most academics and researchers agree that disengagement and engagement represent two ends of the same continuum, and that there are different but interrelated domains of engagement (emotional or affective, behavioural, and cognitive).

A useful model of engagement is provided by Hancock and Zubrick (2015):



Conceptual diagram of engagement (Hancock and Zubrick, 2015, p. 17)

For the purpose of this project the following definition of ‘disengagement’ was adopted:

A complex and multifaceted process of withdrawing and detaching from school as exhibited by lack of participation in class, school, and extracurricular activities; non-attendance or absenteeism; lack of connectedness and sense of belonging; academic failure; poor behaviour and attitudes.

What does the literature say about the factors that cause disengagement and engagement?

In summary, the academic literature stresses that disengagement is not just an outcome but is a process that occurs over time. The causes or risk factors are multifaceted and are clustered – it is often not just the one issue or event, but several, and it is not just related to schools but is also related to individual characteristics and family background. Risk factors include being a victim of bullying or racism; chronic illness; disability; mental health issues; undiagnosed learning disorders; lack of parental or family support; disadvantage; lack of involvement or connection to school; low self-esteem; poor behaviour; and lack of aspiration.

Protective factors that can assist in keeping students engaged include school and family connectedness, a sense of belonging and control and feeling valued.

The research also identified that the earlier in the process that an intervention was undertaken, the more likely it would be successful.

What does the literature say about interventions and strategies?

The primary school environment is different to secondary school due to the smaller size of the school, the nurturing nature, and the relationship with usually the one teacher. By year 3 children can already have internalised behaviours, strategies, and ideas of self-worth.

The research indicates that ready-made programs and strategies are not successful when just transplanted from one school to another and need to be contextualised for each school and community. In other words, a cookie cutter approach does not work. Models, programs, and strategies should also be allowed to happen organically rather than be applied top down. The research also indicates that interventions and strategies are more effective in a ‘whole of school’ approach.

Given the multidimensional and interrelated understanding of school disengagement and engagement, interventions usually address multiple risk factors. Interventions include wrap around programs that support students at risk or that have disengaged such as ‘Team around the Learner’ and anti-bullying programs such as the ‘Rock and Water Program’ or the ‘Friendly School and Families Program’. Mentoring programs such as ‘Big Brother Big Sister’, ‘Salvos Power Hour’, ‘Kidshope’ and ‘Standing Tall’ have also been successful in promoting school connectedness, engagement, and aspiration. Social and emotional learning programs such as the ‘Be You’ initiative and ‘Play is the Way’ assist in the development of resilience and prosocial behaviours. ‘Hands on Learning’ can help with school engagement, attendance, and aspiration, while ‘breakfast clubs’ have been successful in learning engagement and peer connections. Other programs that have been used successfully to facilitate increased school engagement include arts, sports, music, and technology programs and the ‘Classwide Peer Tutoring Program’.

In the school setting, whole of school approaches such as ‘Positive Education’, ‘Respectful Relationships’, ‘Restorative Practice’, cultural training and programs such as ‘You Can Do It’ are also effective.

Summary of Data Analysis

The literature suggests that indicators for disengagement include:

- absenteeism.
- connection to school and peers.
- academic performance.
- behaviour issues.

In order to gain a richer understanding of the scene in the Glenelg Shire, data was accessed from the Victorian Department of Education and Training, Victorian Child, and Adolescent Monitoring System (VCAMS), and is the latest publicly available data. The data was extricated from VCAMS and compared with the data from the other council areas in the Great South Coast (GSC) region as well as the average for the Great South Coast and for Victoria overall. The data was presented and discussed in the Issues Paper. The following is a summary of this data.

Regarding the range of indicators for disengagement, the Glenelg Shire scores relatively highly compared to other local government areas in the GSC, the average for the GSC and with Victoria overall.

Glenelg scores are comparatively worse in e number of students achieving the national benchmark for literacy and numeracy (academic performance); connection to peers (years 5 and 6); connection to school (years 5 and 6); children with emotional or behavioural issues (behaviour issues); and absenteeism.

The observation that there is an issue of disengagement in the Glenelg Shire as articulated by the relevant stakeholders prior to this project is supported by the selected indicator data, however it should be noted that some of the indicator data is outdated and some indicators are based on subjective data (emotional or behavioural issues, and connection to peer and school). There may also be other data sets that reveal a different or richer picture, but they are not accessible in the public domain. Consultation with stakeholders provided a richer and more complete picture than the data alone.

Findings from Consultation

Interview participants were invited to respond to 12 questions with one hour allocated to individual interviews and 1.5 hours allocated to interviews with more than one participant. Questions are included as Appendix 1.

For stakeholders who were unable to participate in interviews due to timing or availability, an online survey with the same questions was provided using the SurveyMonkey tool.

For the purpose of this project, the following definition was provided to respondents at the commencement of each interview:

A complex and multifaceted process of withdrawing and detaching from school as exhibited by lack of participation in class, school, and extracurricular activities; non-attendance or absenteeism; lack of connectedness and sense of belonging; academic failure; poor behaviour and attitudes

Responses are summarised by question as follows:

Q. 1 Recent consultation with key stakeholders indicated that early disengagement by students at primary school is a significant issue in the Glenelg Shire. Is this your experience also?

Most respondents who were principals (80%) agreed that it was an issue at their school, with other stakeholders agreeing that is an issue across the region and the Glenelg Shire. Those respondents who said that it was not an issue at their school were predominantly from the smaller schools in the shire.

Some respondents noted that it seemed to be happening at an earlier age, and that transition from primary school to secondary school was not happening for some young people.

“Yes, disengagement is an issue, and it is happening to more students earlier and earlier across all grades.”

“We see the impact of primary school disengagement at secondary school. They arrive with poor behaviour patterns and have gaps in skills and knowledge”

“I'm finding that the transition period from primary school to high school isn't happening in a lot of young people and they don't appear to be referred to my service until year 8, after the crucial first year of high school. Going back through their history it is evident that disengagement started in early primary school and could have been intervened earlier to support the attendance through primary school and then the transition to high school”

The time spent away from school over terms 2 and 3 due to COVID19 has also impacted, with some difficulty being experienced in re-engaging children this term.

One small rural school indicated that the small number of students at the school enabled them to manage it case by case: *“The environment here is easy to cater for each child’s needs; it’s a different context to a bigger school. Now town life, low numbers and a school garden keeps them engaged.”*

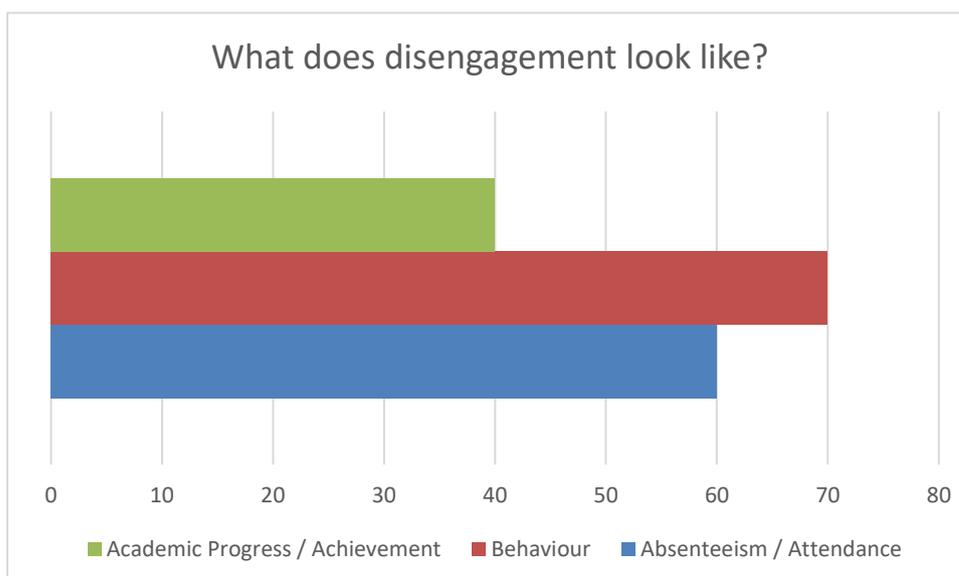
Q. 2 What does disengagement look like to you? How does it present itself? How do you know or identify that a student is disengaged or disconnected or at risk of it?

The main responses to this question can be categorised as relating to absenteeism or attendance issues, behavioural issues and or academic progress / achievement. The specific descriptors provided by respondents are provided in the following table:

Absenteeism / Attendance	Lateness to school; Nonattendance; Not in class; School avoidance Absent without reason; History of family school avoidance
Behavioural issues	Disruptive behaviour; Disengaging socially; Disengaging from community; Not participating; Lack of willingness; Lack of self-esteem; Social disconnection; Poor hygiene; Withdrawn / quiet Mental health issues; Wandering in and out of class; Easily distracted; poor relationship with teacher; Refusing to do work; Behaviour in class; Lack of feeling of belonging; Poor attitude

	Tuning out; Not listening; Lack of focus; Not ready to start learning (tired / hungry); Unhappy; No friendship groups; Presenting to sick bay to avoid classes
Academic progress / achievement	Struggling in class; Disengaging academically; Not doing work; Not submitting work; Avoiding work; Low skills; Disrupted learning Poor language development; Not learning.

A breakdown of responses is provided below:



Commentary included:

“I identify them by noticing them not willing to try new things, low self-esteem, and thinking they can’t be successful”

“Mental health of families is a big factor – students are coming to school dealing with mental health and mental health of their parents - dragging with them to school”

“Disengaged in different ways - get both really disruptive behaviour or really withdrawn child”

“Staying up all night gaming. Can’t be awake in time for school or once they get to school, they are too tired to engage so can result in sleeping in the sick bay or being so disruptive that they end up getting sent home.”

Although absenteeism and attendance issues were identified by the majority of respondents as one of the main indicators of disengagement, one person observed that: *“Some disengaged students are the first ones that arrive to school in the morning and the last to leave at night because school is a safe place for them, but they are not engaged in education and not engaged with peers”*. It was also mentioned that some children come to school to sleep because home is so traumatic for them.

Nearly all respondents remarked that they identified children at risk of disengaging by their behaviour. The behaviours cited included social behaviours as well as behaviours related to emotional wellbeing.

Parenting was also cited as an issue with some respondents commenting that some children are attending school not ready for learning (hungry, tired, etc.) and that some parents don’t want to have their children (identified with behavioural or learning issues) referred for diagnosis.

Approximately 40% of respondents noted that an indicator of disengagement is related to academic performance.

Some other interesting comments included:

- ‘Some children have a backpack of trauma issues’
- ‘Some children are coming to secondary school with skills of a grade 2 student’
- ‘We can predict which kids will disengage (Stepping Stone Program)’
- ‘We find that if a young person isn’t engaging in community events and activities, they aren’t attending school. Definitely see a correlation between the two (KESO)’

Q3. How prevalent do you think disengagement is? Can you estimate a number or proportion?

Most schools do not collect data specific to disengagement, however subjective estimates from respondents varied from 6-10 students at risk at some schools to none at a couple of schools

through to 40-50 students at another school. One school reported 25% of students at risk of disengaging, and another school reported 50% of students.

Some respondents thought that the behavioural issues are increasing, and several noted that the online and home learning that occurred over terms 2 and 3 have impacted on students with higher rates than normal of students disengaging.

A DET respondent noted that chronic absenteeism is 14.2% for Glenelg; higher than for Wimmera Grampians, but not as high as it is in the Warrnambool region. This respondent remarked that absenteeism is a lead indicator for most kids at risk of disengaging, with 80% attendance represented by 1-day absence per week and 90% attendance represented by 1 day per fortnight. According to this respondent, anything less than 90% attendance is an indication that a student is disengaging.

Another respondent observed that it is unclear how schools record attendance for students with modified plans, e.g., some students may be on a plan to attend three days per week and are not at school on the other 2 days. It is not clear whether the other days are recorded as absences or how it is captured.

It was also noted via survey that *“In the Glenelg area I'd say it is highly prevalent, prevalent enough to be able to identify patterns and themes across the schools and areas”*. Although details of specific patterns and themes weren't provided, further engagement with support services may assist in obtaining a richer picture.

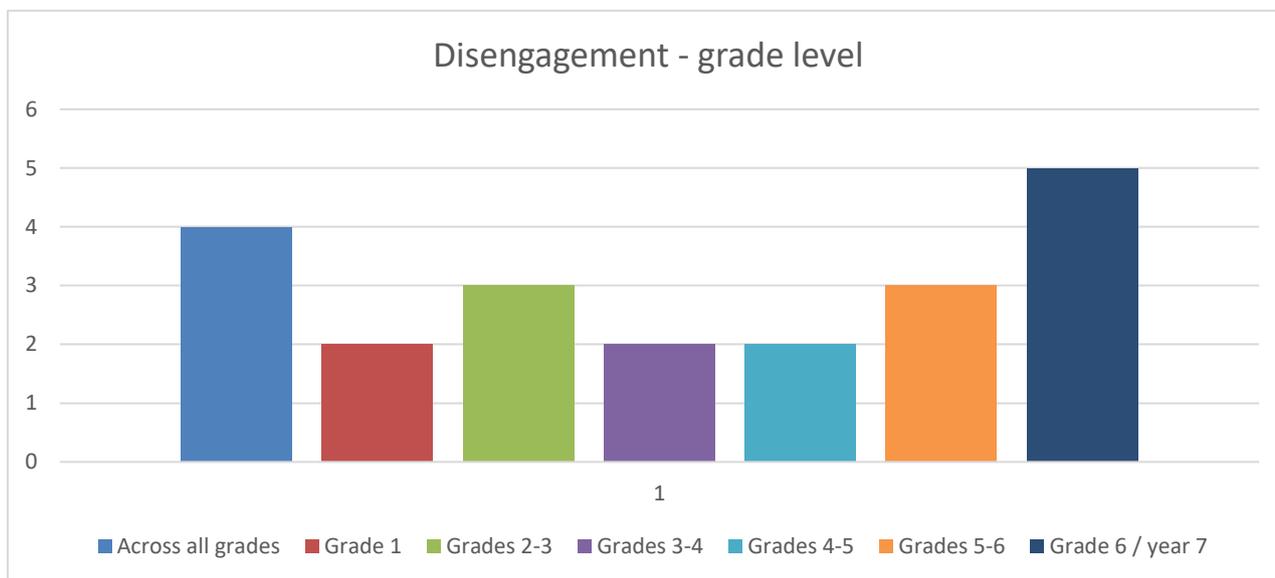
The Check In survey being completed by many principals across the region is expected by some principals to reflect the level of risk of disengagement in those schools. It includes questions about social, emotional, academic, and behavioural aspects of each student, and has been implemented to measure the risk after COVID.

Q4. Is there a particular year level / age group / stage where you think it happens or is likely to happen more frequently?

There was no clear or consistent agreement on the ages or stages where disengagement happens or is likely to happen. Some commented that it was happening across all grades and stages, while

others noticed it occurring in grades 3 and 4 and then setting in by grades 5 and 6. Sometimes it can be cohort specific within a particular group of students, and other noted that it often within particular families.

The following graph indicates the number of responses by grade level:



Some respondents commented that it appeared to be happening much younger, while some others observed that it starts to become evident at Grade 3. The transition from Grade 2 to grade 3 was also noted. One respondent observed that *“It starts in grades 2-3 then again in the transition between primary school and secondary school. We need to harness engagement by grade 3”*. And another respondent: *“Transition from grade 2 to grade 3 is a big jump – common point where students can find hard. We now are better at the transition i.e., introducing teachers, build relationships and preparation 6 months earlier”*.

It was also commented that in dysfunctional families, children start to resent school by year 2.

Respondents observed that by grade 3, children start to become more aware of themselves, school starts to become harder with less play-based learning and more curriculum-based learning. They remarked that children start to become more aware of differences, particularly in ability and degrees of socio-economic status.

“Year 5 & 6 it really sets in but can start to notice in year 3 & 4. They need to get right help at the right time. I think better partnerships between Primary & High Schools would help. It would help

with making sure the teachers are aware of those disengaged children and manage accordingly. Inflexibility of teachers is a problem when dealing with disengaged kids”.

Q5. Thinking about some cases that you are aware of; can you describe them (without identifying names or families)? Tell us about 2 or more cases. How did you identify that they were disengaged? What behaviours / activities made you aware? What did you do to address it?

All respondents provided details on the various cases of disengagement that they are either currently dealing with or have dealt with in the past. Some were successfully re-engaged, and others were not. The cases were mostly complex with multiple factors relating to family circumstances or learning disabilities including:

- Parents with mental health issues or intellectual disabilities
- Transient families
- Children with diagnosed and undiagnosed learning disabilities
- Family violence
- Extreme poverty and dysfunction
- Lack of parenting skills
- Children with mental health issues
- Parent in jail – associated stigma
- Child with mental health issues often related to trauma (including sexual abuse)
- Anxiety
- Relationship between school and family broken down
- Children with autism and not eligible for special school
- Family history of disengagement (including parents and siblings)
- Parents with drug and alcohol issues – chaotic home life

The role of gaming and technology was mentioned several times. Children spent time gaming (sometimes all night) and then cannot get up in time for school. Several cases related to the need for the parent to have the child at home for safety (sometimes because of bullying or family violence), loneliness or anxiety.

Relationships appeared to be a theme throughout the consultations with one principal noting that *“It's all about building relationships – if one relationship is not good (e.g., if one teacher puts them off side) – all relationships are not good”*

Other notable comments included:

“I try and address my practice, try, and understand the problem, BE FLEXIBLE, try and get to know the child better. Find other ways to do things instead of fighting the battle”.

“Some families decide to swap from one school to the next. All the principals know this is happening. Changing schools is really difficult when moving due to disengagement as the behaviours haven't been addressed or supported correctly. ‘School hoppers’ often occur when the family blame the school for the student's issues”.

“A child in out of home care, has trauma and dysregulated. They often don't get all the therapeutic care that they need. Sometimes the behaviour is so extreme, a school can't cater to that. We don't have a behaviour unit down here. The school is doing the best they can. Those carers may not be able to get them to school. Can't get past suspensions, critical incidence reporting”

“Kid also realises that you don't have to go, and you can't make them go. Once the child flat out refuses, even if the parents are trying hard, there is no fall back. The best we can do is send a letter from DET, which is ridiculous considering some of the families have literacy issues. Need to develop the pattern in primary school that you go to school every day”.

“Generational mental health. Student is quite capable but is starting to believe what they are hearing at home. School staff not trained in mental health support, needs to be more than what can be done in schools, with both students and the families” (School support staff).

The efforts made by schools to re-engage the families were also noteworthy, with strategies including staff:

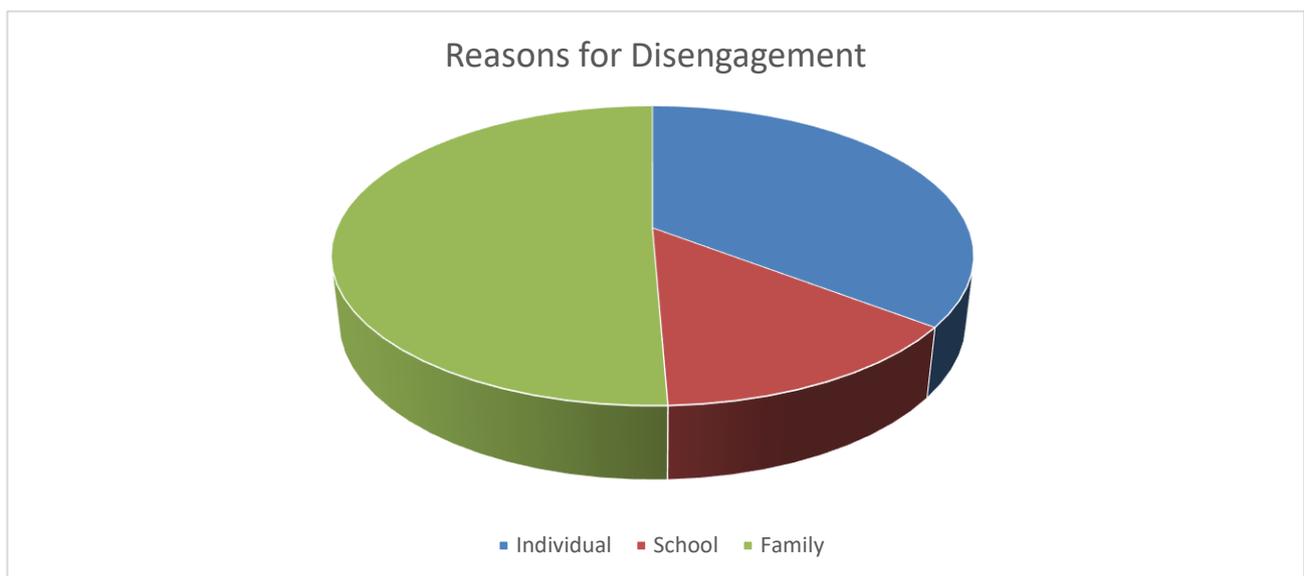
- Encouraging children to get out of the car
- Making wake up phone calls
- Picking them up and taking them to school
- Using restorative practice to address behaviour issues

- Creating You Tube videos with parenting advice

Q6. We know that the issue of disengagement or disconnection is a complex and multi-faceted issue, but we are interested in your views. Why do you think students disengage? Can you tell us what you think are the 3 key / primary reasons for disengagement at your school?

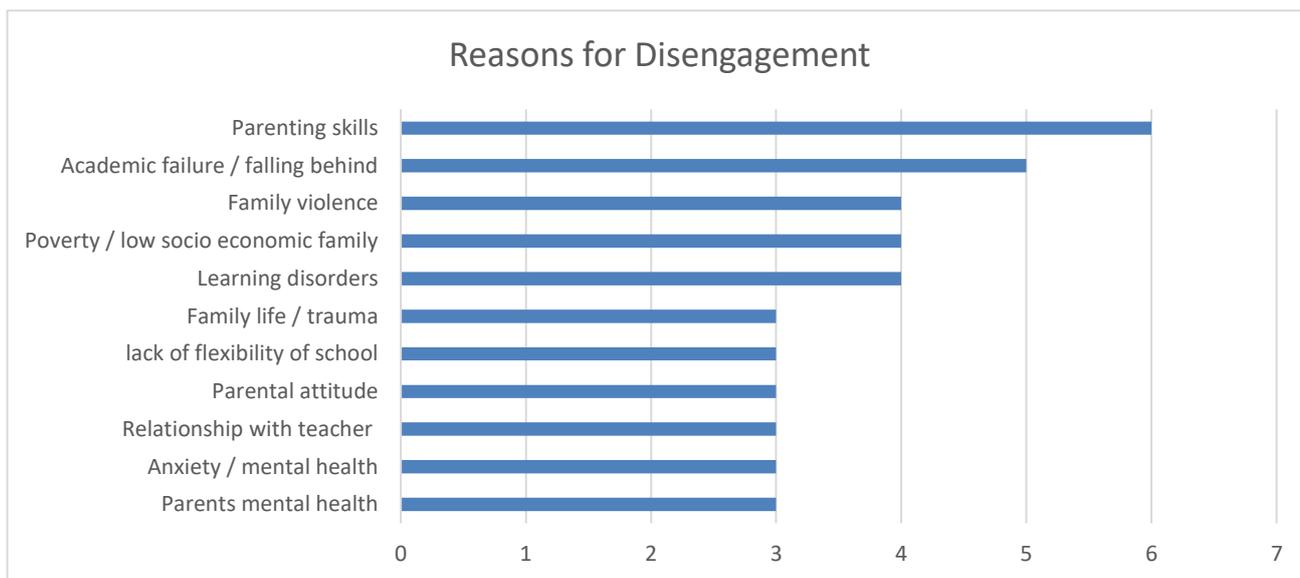
The reasons provided by respondents were many and varied, however can be divided into 3 dimensions: Individual; School; and Family. These dimensions are interrelated and sometimes overlapping.

The following chart indicates the number of responses as categorised by dimension:



The top two reasons were lack of parenting skills and academic failure. These were closely followed by poverty, learning disorders (both diagnosed and undiagnosed) and family violence.

The following chart indicates the leading reasons for disengagement provided by respondents:



When describing the lack of parenting skills, respondents often cited the lack of parental discipline in dealing with things like bedtimes, use of devices, gaming, and the lack of routine and structure. One respondent noted that *“it is easier to let them stay home, especially if they have been up half the night gaming”*. Another respondent observed that *“When kids come up against something that they aren’t good at, they don’t try and give up. Parents in a way perpetuate that. Once you allow a child to decide to stay home from school because they have something hard at school that day – it then becomes a pattern. Parents save them all the time; they want their life to be happy and easy, so they rescue them. They do not let them struggle. Which then impacts on the child’s mental health, because when it does not come easy, they don’t think they are good enough.”*

When describing academic failure, respondents described children falling behind and struggling with the level of school work (too hard or too easy) so that *“the child is so far behind with school work that they don’t want to come to school”*, and *“another thing is students are being passed to the next year level when they aren’t ready, for example you have kids who read at a grade 4 level starting year 7. What is being done to support these students?”*.

Poverty or the socioeconomic status of the family was prominent in all discussions with interviewees. Also, an interrelated factor, it impacts on feelings of shame and stigma, and it often related to the lack of education of parents (also a factor relating to parent attitudes and values). It can also result in a lack of food, shoes, uniforms, etc.

“I am seeing more and more examples of vulnerability - because our housing has been cheaper - welfare are directing people here. My school data over last 10 years - collectively as a community we are getting more vulnerable people - leaving Melbourne because they running away from something - bring with them mental health/broken home/victims of crime/family violence - only a matter of time before that trauma manifests itself in disengagement”

Family violence is also an interdimensional factor causing trauma, absenteeism, shame and stigma, and the impacts can cause mental health issues for the child and the parent as well as drug and alcohol issues.

“Definitely more and more trauma based cases than ever seen before - really ramped up in last 3 or 4 years - a lot of our trauma is around domestic violence. Children Deal with it differently - some have very traumatic backgrounds but struggle - some have what we would consider traumatic background, but they cope ok, students with different levels of trauma cope differently’.

Relationships, teacher skills and the flexibility of schools was also a theme among the responses.

“It's all about what the teacher can do to improve their teacher's strategies and things like that - very little about wellbeing - assume that if you get the teaching strategies right then you will be ok - I believe the teaching strategies are not as important as the building of relationships” (School Principal)

Other reasons provided by stakeholders (categorised according to dimension) include:

Individual: Disengagement can be attributed to specific attributes that relate to the student such as the lack of friends and peer relationships, mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, lack of purpose or interest, or feelings of stigma and shame, or of not feeling accepted, valued, or belonging.

Family: Disengagement can be also attributed to specific attributes that relate to the family such as the mental health and intellectual ability of the parents, family trauma or breakdown, drug and alcohol issues in the home, transient families, and the parent or family attitude to education.

School: Disengagement can also be attributed to school factors such as a lack of student voice, the relationship with the teacher, teacher skills (e.g., dealing with the impact of trauma), the teacher not valuing or believing in the student, inflexible schools that are not adaptable (i.e. not able to individualise teaching to student ability), and the lack of alternative education settings for children and young people aged 11-14 years.

Other reasons provided by stakeholders included social media and the lack of mental health services for children of primary school age.

Q7. When a child / children disengage – how does it affect others in the class/ school? How does it affect staff? How do you feel when it happens?

According to respondents, disengagement does not only affect the student and their family, but also impacts on the teachers, staff, and the other children in the classroom.

Dealing with disruptive behaviour can often be difficult for teachers and principals, causing stress and impacting on their health, wellbeing, and morale. The poor behaviour is also distracting for other students, causing fear, disruption to their learning, and sometimes copycat behaviour. It can also cause a lot of angst in the school community and damage to the school reputation.

“Girls exhibit copycat behaviour - if one girl is feeling quite desperate / anxious...their mates see and copy then there can be a bit of rush on cutting – one started and their friends started within 2 weeks - all for different reasons but the same reason really”

“For really tough kids there is no short term fix, and this is observed by other students. Kids at pointy end can ruin classrooms and ruin schools - situation can do a lot of damage - cause a lot of angst amongst school community - one child can have a huge impact”

Some respondents observed that when students fall behind, it is hard to keep catching them up and the school rating suffers. It was observed that there are not enough teacher aides for disengaged students which may be a funding issue. Stakeholders reported that some parents are reluctant to have their children referred to specialist services for diagnosis as they do not want them labelled or stigmatised. The result is that the school is unable to get funding needed for support staff in the classroom, putting additional pressure on teachers and other children in the classroom.

Some teachers feel that they are becoming social workers. They report feeling wornout and overwhelmed. One principal reported that she was spending 2-3 hours a day dealing with disengaged students and services. She said *“you have got to love these kids or else it would drain you and drag you down. Some staff can’t handle it, and we have had staff leave because they could not deal with the trauma aspect of it.”*

There is also a level of frustration with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Although it is up to individual schools when a child is reported to the department, some respondents reported feeling a sense of failure and frustration when the Department does not act on the reports. They have the option of referring to Child First, but as this is optional for families, it is often not taken up.

Q8. Conversely, thinking about it from another perspective, what are the signs and signals of good connection and engagement by primary school students?

Respondents reported that signs of engagement mostly relate to the student attitude and behaviour, as well as the connectedness of parents and family.

The attitudes and behaviours were mostly described as attending school, punctual and ready to learn. Students participate in class and are confident to engage and 'have a go'. They will ask questions, give answers, show initiative, be helpful and active in class, follow instructions, and take part in all or most of the school life. They are happy, friendly, interested, enthusiastic, sharing, relaxed, calm and can self-regulate. They make eye contact, smile, acknowledge and thank. In addition, they are connected to teachers and peers and display a sense of belonging.

"Students are happy, friendly, willing to do their work, love to share"

"Students are on time, with good levels of attendance. Open and talk. Engage with others. Not trying to exclude. Want to be out playing"

"They smile (simple), acknowledge you, make eye contact, say thank you, and come back"

Parents and family were described as connected and supportive and providing feedback to the teacher and school.

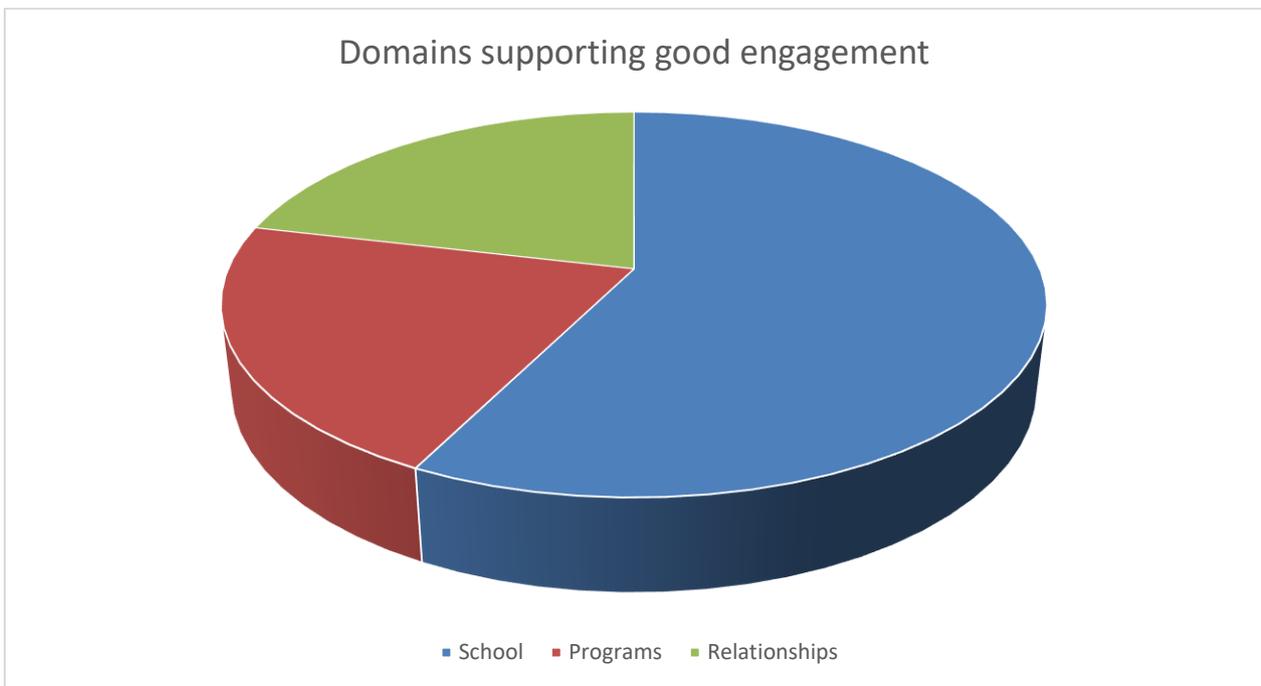
"Children who are well connected to the school usually have parents who have good connected with the school. When the whole family is involved, it's usually a good indication that the child will be engaged"

Q9. What are the things (actions, programs, supports, school culture, etc.) that underpin and ensure good engagement?

Respondents provided a range of things that they believe underpins and ensures good engagement. Responses can be categorised into 3 broad domains that are also interrelated and sometimes overlap:

- School
- Programs
- Relationships

The following chart indicates the responses categorised by domain:



School Domain

The school domain was predominant, with nearly all respondents referring to aspects of the school culture, teaching style, support systems and approaches.

Most (over half) respondents said that a good school culture and associated values underpin good engagement with a whole of school approach and flexibility in teaching and an individual approach to students in the classroom. The Berry Street Education Model and the Positive Education Approach were also mentioned by several respondents as important facets of good engagement as

was the addition of school chaplains and counsellors and providing wellbeing and mental health support in schools.

“It is about building school culture with every teacher on board, the language that you use in the school.... all need to be doing it - learn it - live it (believe it) - embed into school”

Other aspects in the school domain included having a culturally inclusive school that was a safe place for all children, including the student voice, having teacher aides in most classrooms, and ensuring a good transition to secondary school.

“For Koori kids its culturally inclusive school, they can look around and feel proud of their culture. They feel included, safe, and connected”

Providing extra support for children to lift their achievement and intervene when they fall behind was also an important aspect, with intervention programs including literacy, maths, reading and writing. Some respondents mentioned the need for individual learning and behaviour plans, and the importance of a play-based curriculum in junior grades.

“Boost teaching – three times a week, teachers can book a child into a boost session on maths, reading or writing and students goes off in groups of 6-8 for a half an hour session on one skill they may need some extra support in. It isn’t a structured intervention program, just some intensive extra support to give them a “boost” in their learning”

Professional development was also cited as a necessary part of good engagement by several respondents with mention of training for all staff (not just the teachers) in the Berry Education Model; Bridges Out of Poverty; Restorative Practice; and Autism.

“Teachers role becoming increasingly complex... the expectation to be counsellor why is this child behaving the way they are? The teacher is expected to know what is happening in the background, it is becoming a complex role as they need to know what shape that child is in to learn. Trauma training, autism training and training in restorative practices is necessary”

Other things that respondents noted included having small classes, providing a positive first greeting of the day, providing children with responsibility, creating memories and experiences, and having consistent behaviour expectations.

Relationships Domain

This domain overlaps with the school domain and was a predominant theme throughout the stakeholder interviews.

Most responses referred to the relationship between the teacher and the student as an important aspect of good engagement, with the focus on the relationship rather than the program or the curriculum and the need to align the right teacher with the right student. As one respondent observed *“a good teacher who has a good relationship can have success despite using the wrong teaching strategies”* and *“you can put up with someone who is inexperienced or struggles, but a good personality goes a long way”*.

Not only is the student / teacher relationship paramount in good engagement, but respondents also mentioned the need for positive parent and family relationships to underpin good engagement of the student.

“Relationships - school staff parents - taking time - understanding - being prepared to listen - even though parent telling you something that is not right - you can learn from something from that. Need to keep a two way relationship going and try to get parent to agree to things they don't want to. Negotiate – need to do a lot of this”

The relationship with agencies outside school was also mentioned, for example with support agencies that receive NDIS funding.

Some stakeholders emphasised the importance of the connection to school and the need for students to feel a sense of belonging. The importance of peer to peer relationships (friendship groups) was also highlighted.

Program Domain

Respondents referred to many different programs and approaches or models that also ensure good engagement, including the following in order of program with the most mentions at the top of the list. More information on programs can be found in Appendix 2.

- Learning to Learn
- Stepping Stones 2 School

- Hands On Learning
- Social and Emotional Wellbeing (various inhouse and other programs)
- Restorative Practice
- Positive Education Approach
- RRRR Program (resilience, rights, respectful relationships)
- Kitchen Garden
- Parenting Programs (Bringing Up Great Kids and other short courses)
- Sports Programs
- Camps and excursions
- Animals at school (e.g. Paws in Schools)
- Check in and Check out Circle (part of the Restorative Practice and Positive Education Approaches)
- Sensory Program
- Significant 72 Program (focus on building relationships)

Q.10 What do you think could be done to re-engage students that have disconnected / disengaged or are at risk of disengaging?

Although there was a range (over 35) of programs and activities provided by respondents, there was broad agreement on the importance of the following:

- To work with the student and their family to understand what is happening at home and to get the full story behind the student.
- The need to work on the relationship, rebuilding trust using a strength-based approach; build their confidence; acknowledge their skills and talents; and celebrate all successes no matter how minor.
- To take a flexible tailored approach, adapting the learning to their interests, with individual behaviour and learning plans. The Hands On Learning Program was cited several times as a great program that works for reengaging and for students at risk of disengaging.

- To get in early, focusing on the kids at risk and making contact “before things go too badly wrong”.

Other solutions proposed included referring to DHHS, although it was observed that this rarely worked, referring to DET Student Support Services (SSS), the Portland Re-Engagement Program (PREP) for older students (13+), social workers, and the DET Navigator Program.

“Our biggest sadness is when DHHS say there is nowhere to go - can't do any more - not blaming anyone or the individual - their hands are tied - protocols don't allow for solutions”

The need for a local specialised school behaviour unit was also mentioned: *“We need a specialised behaviour unit locally but with two streams, one catering for the trauma, poverty side of things the other one dealing with disability, autism”*

Providing training for staff and parents was also an area that several respondents noted. Staff training included Protective Intervention training and the Berry Street Program. Providing parenting training and support was also considered a useful strategy in re-engaging students.

Other strategies included mentoring programs such as the Standing Tall Program at Heywood, and a buddy program with thriving children.

Q11. Are you aware of any programs, activities, actions that are being trialled, implemented or that are successful in your school or other schools / settings that might or could be applicable here?

Respondents provided a range of over 45 programs, approaches and suggestions relating to broader school approaches or models to smaller classroom-based programs. Staff training was frequently mentioned as was relationship building and individualised learning.

The leading response with 30% of respondents in agreement was the Berry Street Education Model and associated staff training. Other leading responses included the school culture and philosophy with the Positive Education Approach and Restorative Practice cited by several respondents. Some respondents referred to ‘student centred’ approaches and the importance of parent and family engagement.

Respondents recommended a variety of programs, however the outstanding program nominated by 25% of respondents was the Hands On Learning Program, closely followed by mentoring programs such as Standing Tall. Other similar experiential programs cited include kitchen gardens and pets or animals in schools. Clubs within schools were also mentioned, particularly for ASD children.

Programs related to academic support included the Bounce Back Program, Read to a Dog, Reading Recovery, and specific tutoring in literacy and numeracy. Individualised learning was also mentioned with one respondent noting that it was important to “teach the reader rather than teaching reading”. Play based learning was also mentioned as being important in junior school.

Social and emotional wellbeing programs were also often included, with particular mention made of: Live4Life, Anji Play; Nurture Room; Secret Agency Society; and Respectful Relationships; Buddy system; and the CEL Program – building culture and climate in the classroom. Several respondents also pointed out that there needed to be more investment in wellbeing staff and school chaplains.

External programs provided by other agencies were also touched on with mention of the DET Navigator Program and School Focused Youth Service (SFYS). Some respondents felt that the Navigator Program needed more staff and mention was made that SFYS should be made available for younger students.

Regarding Koori students, it is important that the school is perceived as a culturally welcoming and safe place. This can be assisted with the Cultural Audit Tool and lead to landscape changes such as native gardens and yarning circles as well as an ‘acknowledgement of country’ sign and Koori art works displayed. The addition of a Gunditjmarra Language and Culture Program and for all students and the introduction of the Clontarf Program can also assist in ensuring the school is culturally safe and welcoming.

Staff training was also frequently mentioned, especially training in the Berry Street Education Model. Other training considered important was the Bridges out of Poverty training; Zones of Regulation training and Cultural Education and Safety training (CUST). Providing support and training in parenting for families and carers was also raised as needing attention.

There was also some support for a separate re-engagement program for younger students (aged 11-14years) with mention of an existing primary school being changed into an alternative setting for behavioural / regulation programs, hand on learning and life skills programs.

Respondents also pointed out that programs must be tailored specifically for the school and bringing in programs that were not able to be customised did not work. Several stakeholders stressed that the focus should be on relationships and people first, and programs after that.

“Start with families – need to work with the families more and address what some of the issues are at home that are getting in the way of families valuing education. But schools currently don’t have capacity to do this. Beyond what we can do, but need to engage community services, and not on a voluntary basis”

Q12. Do you have any other relevant insights, comments, or thoughts that you would like to share with us?

While not all respondents answered this question, those that did took the opportunity to emphasize their earlier responses and some provided some rich and thoughtful responses.

Nearly half of the respondents took the opportunity to reiterate the need for schools and teachers to be flexible, adaptable, supportive and to value children’s individuality. One respondent noted that *“schools could learn from retail in terms of customer service – if they walk out the door, the business goes broke. Instead of students having to fit schools, schools should have a student-centred approach and meet their needs in a more comprehensive manner”*.

A couple of respondents noted that teachers were stressed and feeling overwhelmed with the workload and in dealing with behavioural issues. Some commented that 2020 has been a challenging year resulting in more disengagement because of remote learning.

“You just need to look at the stress leave of teachers to see that classrooms are getting harder and harder places to be – the load is too much, behaviour problems increasing and still only one teacher in classrooms. If a teacher has a number of students who are disengaged it makes their job extremely difficult”

Some respondents also commented on the need for a regional school for children with ASD and for a separate school or campus for children who disengage. Currently children with ASD are mostly

enrolled in mainstream schools where many struggle to fit in. Respondents asserted that Portland Bay School is not funded to accept children with ASD unless they have an IQ under 70. It was also remarked that there is a *“massive number of kids with low IQ, but not low enough for support funding or for them to go to Portland Bay School”*

Note 1: Portland Bay School is a State Government Special Development School for students with an intellectual disability. Students are eligible to enrol at Portland Bay School if they have an intellectual disability as assessed by DET. This involves having a current cognitive assessment completed by a DET recognised psychologist stating the student has an intellectual disability.

Note 2: Portland Reengagement Program (PREP) operates under the umbrella of the Portland Secondary college and is located on a separate campus in South Portland. The program is aimed at students who have disengaged from mainstream education (secondary education) or students who are at risk of disengaging. Students are enrolled in VCAL or VETiS from years 10-12.

There was also some commentary on the disjointed systems (e.g., DHHS, other support / welfare agencies and DET) highlighting the need for better communication and information sharing with schools.

One respondent observed that there is a need to develop a collaborative framework or tool to help schools identify children who are disengaged or who are risk of being disengaged. It was also remarked that transition planning is also needed between year 2 and into grades 3 / 4 with a big focus on wellbeing. As one respondent stated, *“early intervention is so important, and it needs to start in the early years”*.

It was also noted that although there is a lot of ‘school hopping’ in Portland, there is a ‘great principal network’ that operates as a ‘learning circle’ and provides support for principals in the Glenelg Shire.

And finally, respondents kept coming back to the issue of the teacher / child relationship. As one respondent noted *“the teacher relationship with the child is important – teachers need to be adaptable and supportive and value kids”*. There is a need for more wellbeing staff and chaplains in schools, as one respondent observed *“you can’t have success without wellbeing”*.

Discussion

Is disengagement in primary school an issue in the Glenelg Shire?

Most respondents in the stakeholder consultation agreed that disengagement was an issue at their school with some observing that it appears to be getting worse.

This confirms the absenteeism data for the Glenelg Shire which indicates that the rates in Glenelg are higher overall than for Victoria and the Great South Coast overall, with an upward trend over the period 2013-2018 of 10.8% (Issues Paper p. 47). Absenteeism or non-attendance was also identified by stakeholders as one of the key identifiers of disengagement.

The other indicators identified by stakeholders were behavioural issues and or academic progress or achievement. The data indicates that Glenelg scores are comparatively worse in the number of students achieving the national benchmark for literacy and numeracy (academic performance); connection to peers (Years 5-6); connection to school (years 5 and 6); children with emotional or behavioural issues (Issues Paper, p. 57).

Some stakeholders also observed that the time spent away from school over terms 2 and 3 of 2020 due to COVID 19 has also impacted with further difficulty being experienced in re-engaging children this term.

What does disengagement look like in the Glenelg Shire?

Stakeholders identified absenteeism, attendance issues, behavioural issues and or academic progress or achievement as indicators that identify that a student is disengaged or disconnected or at risk. However, the dominant indicator was their behaviour. Specific behaviours include being disruptive, quiet and withdrawn, not participating, attitudes, and lacking in friendship groups (see full list on p. 21).

The literature discusses the multi-dimensional and complex nature of engagement and disengagement noting that there is no 'one indicator' to measure student disengagement. Researchers observe that the three interrelated dimensions as behavioural, emotional, and cognitive (Issues Paper pp 23-25). The Hancock and Zubrick conceptual diagram of engagement

(see p. 17) aligns with the stakeholder findings, emphasising the range of different settings and domains.

Although there was no overall stakeholder consensus on the ages or stages when disengagement happens or likely to happen, some stakeholders identified it as occurring at grades 3-4 and referred to this as a transition period in primary school where students are becoming more self-aware and are moving into early adolescence and a less play based curriculum. The literature (cited in the Issues Paper) noted that although disengagement can occur at any stage, the middle years phase (i.e., the last two years of primary school) featured predominantly in the Australian discussion about primary school disengagement, coinciding with the onset of adolescence. A further exploration of the literature found that researchers claim that it is possible to predict disengagement with a high degree of accuracy in the younger years (8-12) (Lamb and Dulfer, 2008). A deeper dive into the literature and data is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the risks of disengagement associated with the different ages and stages in primary school.

What are the factors that cause disengagement and engagement?

Overall, stakeholders identified three interrelated dimensions of factors or causes of disengagement and disconnection:

- Individual (lack of friends, anxiety and depression, feelings of stigma and shame, etc.)
- School (relationship with teacher, teacher skills, inflexible schools, etc.)
- Family (parenting skills, family trauma, family values, etc.)

Stakeholders also had diverse views on the elements of good engagement. These can be categorised into three broad domains that also overlap and interrelate:

- School – nearly all respondents referred to culture, teaching styles and approaches
- Programs – a variety of programs were provided
- Relationships – also a predominate theme, relationships between teacher and student and between students.

These findings are broadly consistent with the views outlined in the literature described in the Issues Paper. However, the literature emphasised more so than the stakeholders that the causes are multifaceted and interrelated, and there is not one factor, but many. The relationships between the factors are extraordinarily complex and according to Murray et al, they ‘form a dense and complex web of interrelated, interacting and multi directional forces’ (20014, p. 23).

Interestingly, the literature describing other research on the views of teachers found that they have a diverse view on the factors that underpin engagement and disengagement, whereas the research on students' views indicate that it is relationships (with peers and teachers) that is of critical importance to their experience of engagement and disengagement (Hancock and Zubrick, 2015, p. 49). In addition, Hancock and Zubrick also note that schools and teachers regularly locate the cause of student engagement and responsibility for it, with the family whereas students mostly locate the responsibility in the classroom or school setting.

The stakeholders in this project provided a diverse range of views that included both family and the school setting. This differed from the literature, as stakeholders' views in this project identified the importance of both the school setting (culture, etc) and relationships (teachers and peers).

Further consultation with parents and students would assist in obtaining a more balanced view from other perspectives. This is planned in the next phase of this project.

What interventions and strategies are the most successful?

The research and literature on engagement and disengagement all emphasised that contextual factors matter, and that programs and strategies cannot just be transported from school to school or community to community. No single program or model was identified, rather that they need to develop organically and should be based on what works for that school and community.

Interventions should address multiple risk and or protective factors. Nonetheless, many programs, activities and strategies were identified in the literature (refer to Issues Paper).

The consultation with Glenelg stakeholders provided a richer and more profound view of interventions because of the actual experience of implementing the strategies and approaches in their contexts and settings. Consultations with Glenelg stakeholders also identified many and varied programs and activities, and several stakeholders continued to stress that they need to be tailored and customised for each school and community setting.

The successful programs (in school settings) that were identified frequently both in the literature and through the stakeholder consultations included the following (see Appendix 2 for more information on each program):

- Hands On Learning Program

- Cultural Education and Safety Training
- Restorative Practice
- Positive Education Approach
- Respectful Relationships
- Berry Street Education Model
- Standing Tall (mentoring program)

Although the Berry Street Education Model was not identified in the Issues Paper, an evaluation undertaken by Stokes and Turnbull (2016) affirmed the positive impact of the model on student wellbeing, achievement, behaviour, and engagement. This program is already embedded in several schools in the Glenelg Shire, and was noted by one respondent as being a necessary part of the scaffolding before the Positive Education Approach could be implemented. The Bridges out of Poverty training was also mentioned as an adjunct to the Berry Street Education Model. This training aims to provide tools to address the complexities of working with children and families who have experienced intergenerational poverty.

A whole of school approach was identified in the literature as important in building a culture that engages students and is a protective factor in preventing disengagement. The literature and stakeholders affirmed that Undertaking Cultural Understanding and Safety Training by school staff is an important element in ensuring cultural safety for Koori students as is the application of the Cultural Audit Tool and the implementation of the Gunditjmarra Language and Cultural Program for all school students.

The Positive Education Approach has been implemented in various forms by over half of the schools in the Glenelg Shire. The practice of restorative practice has also been taken up by several schools. These whole of school approaches inform and establish school cultures; however, their success needs all staff trained and on board with the philosophy. The costs associated with the staff training and access to supporting resources and subject experts is often expensive and may be beyond the means of some schools.

Schools appear to be implementing a range of individual social and emotional wellbeing programs, but stakeholders continued to highlight the need to focus on the student teacher and peer to peer relationships for successful student engagement.

Conclusion

The Issues Paper found that there is a lack of published research on disengagement in the primary school years (ages 5-12) particularly in Victoria and rural and regional school settings. Nonetheless the research and the stakeholder consultation indicated that disengagement is described and measured in many ways. Researchers generally agreed that it is a multidimensional concept with behavioural, affective, and cognitive aspects and is better described as a continuum from fully engaged through to fully disengaged, and that is a process as well as an outcome.

Both the research and stakeholder consultations confirmed that the factors contributing to disengagement can be clustered and are varied. Whilst the literature indicated that the factors are less related to school and more related to individual characteristics and family backgrounds, stakeholders viewed the school culture and teaching style were critical as was relationships (student teacher and peer to peer). More research is needed to understand the views and perspectives of students, parents, and families. It may also be useful to hear the views of the chaplains, school wellbeing staff and the aides and support staff working in the classrooms.

It would also be useful to undertake further consultation with DET. Apart from SFYS and the Navigator Program, stakeholders did not often refer to DET policies and programs. DET provides a student mapping tool, a computer-based application available to all Victorian Government schools that collates a range of school-level data to identify those students at risk of disengagement. DET also has a range of policies and programs that address additional students needs. As one stakeholder pointed out: *“local programs, initiatives between schools, communities, DET staff and other agencies could be a great outcome, like Stepping Stones, however, for DET to come onboard or for it to fit within such a collaborative school-family-agency approach it will be policies, priorities and procedures that will need to be in place”*. Further interviews with the DET regional and central office Inclusive Education Teams would enable a better understanding of the current work being undertaken in this space by DET.

There was broad agreement among stakeholders on the importance of the following to re-engage and address the risk of disengagement:

- To work with the student and family to understand the full story
- To work on the relationship – trust, confidence, positivity

- Flexible tailored approach with individual behaviour and learning plan
- To identify those at risk and intervene early

The schools in the Glenelg Shire all appear to work independently with different programs and approaches, although many are implementing various components of Positive Education. The support of the Principals Network and its learning circle approach to the issue of student engagement was frequently noted by stakeholders, however many stakeholders expressed concern about the overwhelming nature of disengagement and the lives of the students involved.

Disengagement impacts not only the individual students concerned, but also the teachers, staff, and other children in the classroom. The cases described by the stakeholders were mostly complex and, in their words, ‘heartbreaking’, with the role of gaming and technology mentioned several times. The many ways that each of them attempted to keep students engaged was remarkable and inspiring. As one respondent noted “I am always thinking about it, even when out jogging”. There is clearly a passion and energy to do something about it.

The following recommendations have been informed by the literature review and stakeholder engagement.

Recommendations

The intention of the Glenelg Local Action Group of Beyond the Bell is to seek further funding to undertake further consultation with students, parents and families, and support school staff, with particular focus on those with the lived experience of disengagement. The findings from that consultation will then be used to further inform and refine the following recommendations. The following recommendations are not in priority order.

Recommendation 1: Adopt a shire wide and all of school approach to addressing disengagement / support engagement in learning in primary schools in the Glenelg Shire.

Recommendation 2: Undertake an audit of social and emotional programs being offered at each of the schools in the Glenelg Shire to enable a shire wide understanding and picture to inform future initiatives

Recommendation 3: Seek access to the DET ‘Check In’ survey data at the shire level. Currently access is provided at the regional level (south west Victoria). This data could also assist in informing next steps.

Recommendation 4: Undertake further engagement with the DET Inclusive Education Team (central and regional offices) to better understand DET policies, priorities, procedures, and current work in the ‘inclusive education’ and the ‘engagement with learning’ areas to inform future initiatives and work by the BtB GLAG

Recommendation 5: Development of a ‘Theory of Change (TOC)’ – a framework recommended for delivery of social change ([Centre for Theory of Change](#)). This methodology is used at the strategic level for planning, participation and evaluation of initiatives and programs to promote social change. TOC defines long term goals and then maps backward to identify necessary preconditions. It is often in the form of: Inputs → activities → outputs → outcomes → impacts

Recommendation 6: Development of a Program Logic, a thinking planning and implementation tool that describes and diagrammatically represents how a project, program or strategy intends to impact in context. Logic models are powerful tools for creating understanding of a program and link inputs to activities and to expected outputs and outcomes. A program logic for each of the phases or follow up projects to this paper would be useful for evaluation purposes as well as supporting funding and resource requests.

Recommendation 7: Based on a TOC and or Program Logic, work with the Principals Network and other relevant stakeholders to develop shire wide strategy and action plan to address disengagement and support engagement in learning. The Plan to be multidimensional and include a variety of settings and domains. Consider inclusion of:

- Prioritisation of foundation and lower grades as an important stage in the development of disengagement and identification
- Alternate education setting for primary school age students
- Alternate setting for Autism
- Stepping Stones 2 School for Primary Schools – support for vulnerable families (building on the existing program in the early years).
- Hands on Learning for all schools

- Cultural Audit Tool to be applied to all schools (specific strategies for Koori students and families)
- Data to measure success; agree on indicators (absenteeism, etc.)
- Support for principals and teachers – learning circles / communities of practice
- Tool or frameworks for supporting identification of those at risk
- Audit of programs / approaches undertaken in each of the schools in the shire
- Support for the Positive Education and Restorative Practice approaches to be extended across all schools in the Glenelg Shire

Recommendation 8: Undertake an advocacy and lobbying role to government for better communication between government departments and with schools; more resources for wellbeing staff; more staff for Navigator program; and other issues as raised by Principals Network and other stakeholders.

Recommendation 9: Undertake audit of staff training to identify which schools, grade levels and staff have received training in programs such as the Berry Street Education Model (trauma informed practice), Bridges Out of Poverty, Restorative Practice, etc. Use the audit as the basis to develop a Staff Training Plan for schools in Glenelg Shire as an add-on to the Shire wide Engagement in Learning strategy and plan.

Recommendation 10: Seek funding and work with the Principals Network, SEIL and DET to deliver staff training on the ground in Glenelg Shire in accordance with the Staff Training Plan

Recommendation 11: Investigate a means of providing parents with parenting advice and co-design a solution with parents and families

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview / Focus Group Questions

- 1) Recent consultation with key stakeholders indicated that early disengagement by students at primary school is a significant issue in the Glenelg Shire. Is this your experience also?
(We want to find out if they think it is an issue / problem in their experience or school)
- 2) What does disengagement look like to you? How does it present itself? How do you know or identify that a student is disengaged or disconnected or at risk of it?
(We want to know how they identify students who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging)
- 3) How prevalent do you think disengagement is? Can you estimate a number or proportion? (Explore other data sets that might be accessible) (Looking to get an idea of the extent of the issue / problem)
- 4) Is there a particular year level / age group / stage where you think it happens or is likely to happen more frequently?
(When is it happening? What age or stage?)
- 5) Thinking about some cases that you are aware of, can you describe them (without identifying names or families)? Tell us about 2 or more cases. How did you identify that they were disengaged? What behaviours / activities made you aware? What did you do to address it?
(We want to get a picture of how they deal with it)
- 6) We know that the issue of disengagement or disconnection is a complex and multi-faceted issue, but we are interested in your views. Why do you think students disengage? Can you tell us what you think are the 3 key / primary reasons for disengagement at your school?
(We want to know why they think it is happening)
- 7) When a child / children disengage – how does it affect others in the class/ school? How does it affect staff? How do you feel when it happens? (What is the effect on others?)
- 8) Conversely, thinking about it from another perspective, what are the signs and signals of good connection and engagement by primary school students? (we want to know how students behave when they are 'engaged')
- 9) What are the things (actions, programs, supports, school culture, etc.) that underpin and ensure good engagement? (How do they think good engagement can be achieved)
- 10) What do you think could be done to re-engage students that have disconnected / disengaged or are at risk of disengaging?
(What are their ideas about / what do they do to get kids to re-engage?)
- 11) Are you aware of any programs, activities, actions that are being trialled, implemented or that are successful in your school or other schools / settings that might or could be applicable here? (What programs, actions, activities do they know of that works?)
- 12) Do you have any other relevant insights, comments or thoughts that you would like to share with us? (Do they have any other comments or thoughts?)

Appendix 2

Name of Program / Model / Approach	Brief description
<u>Anji Play</u>	A model of early childhood development - learning through self-determined play. Developed in China, it involves the principles of Love, risk, joy, engagement and reflection.
<u>Berry Street Education Model</u>	A trauma informed positive education initiative. It integrates clinical, educational and welfare approaches.
<u>Bounce Back Program</u>	A positive education approach to wellbeing, resilience and social emotional learning for primary school children
<u>Bridges Out Of Poverty Training</u>	Training provides tools to address the complexities of working with children and families who have experienced intergenerational poverty
<u>Bringing up Great Kids</u>	Parenting program that uses mindfulness and reflection to support parents to review and enhance their communication with children, promoting respectful interactions and children's positive self-identity
<u>Buddy Program (e.g. Better Buddies Program)</u>	Programs that involve children being paired with other children. Often between older and younger children to support smooth transitions.
<u>Check in and Check Out Circle</u>	Dialogue circle - children sit in circle and face each other in a safe and supportive space to talk about sensitive topics, work through differences and build consensus. Often used as part of Restorative Justice Approach
<u>Clontarf Program</u>	Clontarf Academies are located within schools to foster positive learning and personal growth for young ATSI men.
<u>Cultural Education and Safety Training (CUST)</u>	Training re embedding Koori cultural inclusion in the school culture and curriculum to foster a strong sense of belonging within a school community.
<u>Hands on Learning Program</u>	Program where artisan teachers work with small groups of students on projects that provide a platform for students to engage, grow confidence and achieve success at school
<u>Kitchen Garden</u>	Based on Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden - children grow, harvest, prepare and share fresh food with the aim of forming positive food habits for life
<u>Learning to Learn</u>	A South Australian Initiative: Learning the attitudes, skills and knowledge to become a more effective learner
<u>Live4Life</u>	A mental health education and youth suicide prevention model designed specifically for rural and regional communities.
<u>Navigator Program</u>	A DET case management program that supports disengaged young people to return to education and learning.

<u>Nurture Room</u>	Based on attachment theory, nurture rooms provide a safe and welcoming environment for children with psychosocial disorders and related emotional and behavioural problems. Children are taken out of mainstream classes to spend time in the Nurture Room.
<u>Paws In Schools</u>	Providing therapy animals in school setting - can contribute towards wellbeing of students
<u>Positive Education Approach</u>	A spin off from positive psychology involving a strength-based approach with appropriate interventions - decision making, coping, problem solving skills, relaxation, etc.
<u>Read to A Dog (Story Dogs Program)</u>	Dogs with patient temperaments are bought to school by volunteers to sit with children with reading difficulties and listen to them read.
<u>Reading recovery</u>	Short term literacy intervention program designed for students in the first 2 years of primary school who are reading and writing below year level expectations.
<u>Respectful Relationships</u>	Whole of school approach encourages a culture where respectful relationships and gender equality practices are modelled across the entire school community.
<u>Restorative Practice</u>	Framework used to create safe, supportive spaces in schools through honest and sometimes difficult conversations. Involves fair responsive processes to share stories, hear impact of actions and repair relational harm
<u>RRRR Program (Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships)</u>	Program to develop students social, emotional and positive relationships skills.
<u>School Focused Youth Services</u>	Targeted interventions for students (year 5 to year 12) vulnerable to or showing signs of disengaging from school. Community agencies funded by DET deliver this program.
<u>Sensory Program</u>	Program involving classroom and teaching strategies for students with sensory processing issues
<u>Significant 72</u>	Based on work by John Hattie with focus on intentionally developing relationships between teachers and students and between students
<u>Standing Tall (mentoring program)</u>	School-based mentoring program where community volunteers are trained to become mentors, visiting allocated students for an hour each week with the aim of building their self-confidence and resilience and assisting them to engage in their education. In place at Heywood & District Secondary College.
<u>Stepping Stones 2 School</u>	Developed in the Glenelg Shire and funded by State Trustees Foundation Australia to enable a smooth and positive transition from early year programs into primary school. A wrap around service is provided for vulnerable families providing additional assistance in the transition process and a protocol supporting enhanced collaboration between kinder and primary school staff.
<u>Zones of Regulation</u>	Framework designed to foster self-regulation and emotional control. A systematic cognitive behavioural approach.