

Insights for Early Action

Using data and evidence to identify students
at risk of disengagement from school

July 2019



Education
and Training



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Foreword

Student engagement, disengagement, and the way we identify this for our learners is always changing. Because of this, and now more than ever, we need to refresh our understanding of how student engagement impacts teaching and learning.

Insights for Early Action will assist educators and school leaders to understand the factors that contribute to disengagement, the predictive strength of these factors, and will explore best-practice examples of interventions to prevent disengagement. While it does not outline all possible interventions, it provides further prompts, as well as outlining the benefits of connecting closely with families.

Some students have thrived during the COVID-19 remote learning experience, and others have craved the personal connections afforded by face-to-face learning. School leaders, teachers and students have rapidly implemented remote and flexible learning. The risks of disengagement from school have been heightened for some students, and reduced for others. In this environment and as the next normal emerges there is a need for innovation to address access and equity issues.

Insights for Early Action will help to inform decisions about what supports schools can offer to students to enhance opportunities for successful learning.

The Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership, in partnership with Evidence for Learning and Monash University Faculty of Education set out to investigate how schools can best identify students at risk of disengaging from their learning. Specifically, the study investigated how schools can use data to identify which students are more likely to disengage from learning, whether they are showing outward signs of disengagement or quietly disengaging.

The study also set out to uncover examples of promising practice in schools that are already using data to identify students at risk of disengagement. The insights and evidence shared by these schools has been captured here in practical case studies.

We hope these insights provide school leaders and teachers with valuable guidance to build on these foundations, use data to refine the engagement efforts, and support every student to thrive.

Kate Morris

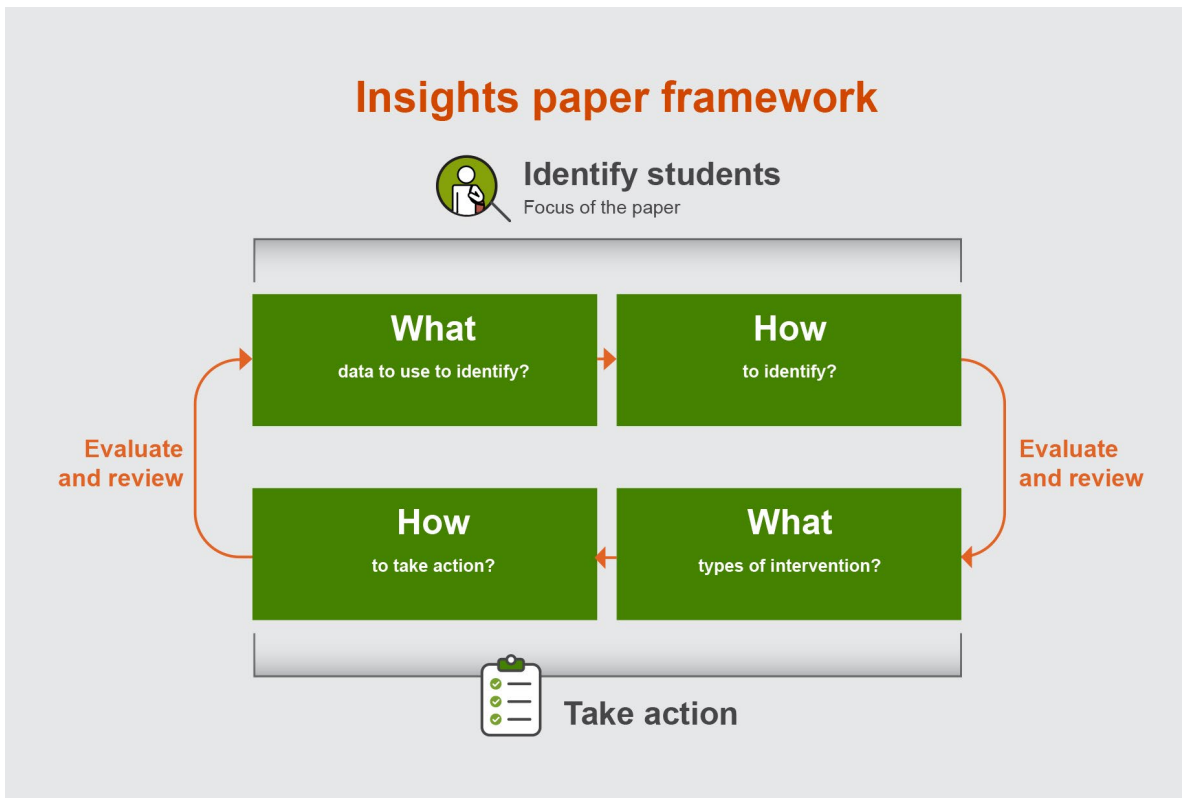
Interim CEO, Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership
Department of Education and Training (Victoria)

Guide to this paper

This paper is prepared for use by Victorian school leaders, teachers and wellbeing staff to assist decision-making about appropriate indicators, tools, processes and enabling conditions that help with the early identification of students at risk of disengagement. The paper provides evidence solely from a global literature review and insights from ten Victorian case study schools for consideration and adaptation to local contexts.

The focus of this paper is on the identification of students at risk of disengagement from school. It provides evidence and insights on **what** indicators to use to identify students at risk of disengagement and **how** to undertake early identification of these students. The paper also provides some information from research and case study schools on taking action to support students at risk of disengagement, including what interventions are used in schools and how schools can establish processes to support these students.

However, this paper is not a detailed guide to interventions and strategies to keep students engaged in school. Importantly, it does not represent a review or evaluation of the efficacy of intervention programs or strategies used in the case study schools. Rather, the paper outlines the features of evidence-based interventions from the global literature review, and a snapshot of a number of interventions being used in ten Victorian schools.



This paper has five sections:

1. **Introduction**
Brief overview of the project that informed this paper including its focus, aims, key terms and research methodology
2. **What data can schools use to identify students at risk of disengagement? (Identify students)**
Outlines insights from a global literature review and case studies of ten Victorian schools on the indicators of disengagement

3. **How can schools develop processes to support early identification? (Identify students)**
Outlines processes, tools, and enabling conditions to guide schools in the early identification of students at risk of disengagement
4. **What types of interventions can schools consider? (Take action)**
Describes the features of some early intervention programs, and provides a snapshot of a number of interventions that ten Victorian schools are using with students at risk of disengagement
5. **How can schools establish processes to take action? (Take action)**
Briefly outlines some processes and enabling conditions used to support intervention with students at risk of disengagement.

School leaders, teachers and wellbeing staff are encouraged to adopt and adapt the processes, tools, resources and guidance in this paper to the needs of their school and their students.



Assessing the most relevant information for your school

Is your school already implementing processes to identify at-risk students?

Some schools may have processes in place to identify students at risk of disengagement. Readers from these schools may wish to review the evidence base on predictors of students at risk of disengagement in **Section 2: What data can schools use to identify students at risk of disengagement?** They can then compare the data and interventions used in their school to the data and interventions that are being used in the ten Victorian case study schools in **Section 4: What types of interventions can schools consider?**

Is your school yet to implement processes to identify at-risk students?

Readers from schools not currently using a process to identify at-risk students may wish to review processes to identify students at risk of disengagement in Section 3. How can schools develop processes to support early identification? Readers can then review processes to support intervention with students at risk of disengagement in **Section 5: How can schools establish processes to take action?**, in addition to reviewing the evidence summarised in sections 2 and 4.

Educators should use their professional discretion to identify which indicators are applicable in their context and to consult with relevant family members, child support agencies and wellbeing professionals to design and implement suitable intervention strategies.

Quotations throughout the paper highlight current practices within the case study schools as stated by participants.

1 Introduction

In 2018, the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership, part of the Victorian Department of Education and Training (the Department), in partnership with Evidence for Learning and the Monash University Faculty of Education initiated a research project titled the Insights for Early Action Research Project. The project aimed to understand and improve how Victorian schools identify students who are at risk of disengagement, and the processes and enablers for taking early action to keep students engaged with their education.

1.1 Helping Victorian schools to identify students at risk of disengagement early

The project was underpinned by a ‘theory of change’, which represented the aspirational goal of the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership for the Insights for Early Action Research Project.

Theory of change

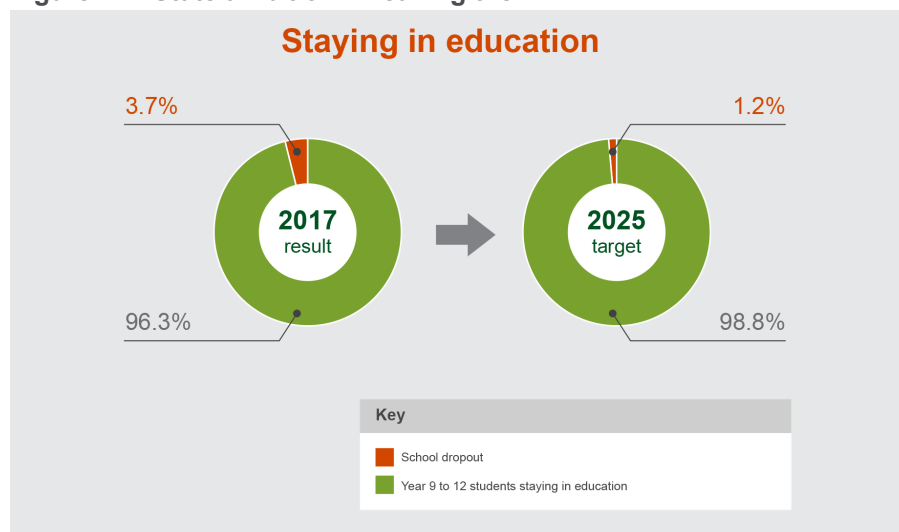
If school leaders and teachers understand how to best use data, and the appropriate types of data, to identify students most at risk of disengagement, **then** schools can target their improvement efforts to best meet the needs of these identified students, **so that** more students will have increased learning and wellbeing outcomes.

To enact this theory of change, the project aimed to add to knowledge about predictors of disengagement in Victorian public schools, as well as to identify promising practices to monitor and minimise risk of disengagement. The project will help to inform current and future reform work within the Department relating to student attendance and engagement, including the trial of a predictive analytics tool for identifying students at risk of disengagement.

1.2 Rationale for the project

Approximately 70,000 Australian students do not attain a Year 12 certificate or equivalent qualification.¹ In Victoria in 2017, 3.7% of students in years 9–12 left school early. The Victorian Government is aiming to reduce this percentage to 1.2% by 2025.

Figure 1.2: State ambition: Breaking the link



Source: © State of Victoria (Department of Education and Training). [Creative Commons BY 4.0](#)²

The early identification of students at risk of disengagement benefits both the student and the community. Students who disengage with their education (in school or vocational training) are significantly disadvantaged in respect to employment, health, wealth, and socio-cultural relationships. Analysis based on 2014 Australian data, for example, puts the average lifetime economic cost as \$344,600 for each early leaver, and the average social cost as \$612,200 for each early leaver over the adult years (25–64).³

School leaders, teachers and wellbeing officers are increasingly interested in research that will inform them of best-practice strategies to identify and intervene early with students at risk of disengagement.

“ Earlier identification is so important ... the reality is that when those negative behaviours become chronic school issues, it is really hard to get them back engaged, so that early intervention, when we are starting to see patterns of non-attendance, is really important.”

(Victorian secondary school social worker)

Currently, the evidence base is better developed in relation to certain topics (for example, the predictors of school dropout, or withdrawal) and locations (for example, the USA). The Insights for Early Action project identified that there is real potential for evidence-informed practice in this area. Emerging research on the use of data to identify students at risk of disengagement suggests that school staff can purposefully develop early-warning processes that monitor all students in order to proactively intervene when students show signs of disengagement. These research-informed insights can provide initial guidance for the design, development, implementation and evaluation of early intervention programs in Australian schools and schooling systems.

1.3 Methodology

The Insights for Early Action Research Project reviewed national and international research studies that investigated effective early identification and intervention strategies for students at risk of disengagement. It combined this review of literature with qualitative case studies about the current processes and actions taken for early identification and intervention in ten Victorian schools.

The project collected information from two sources:

1. Global literature review⁴

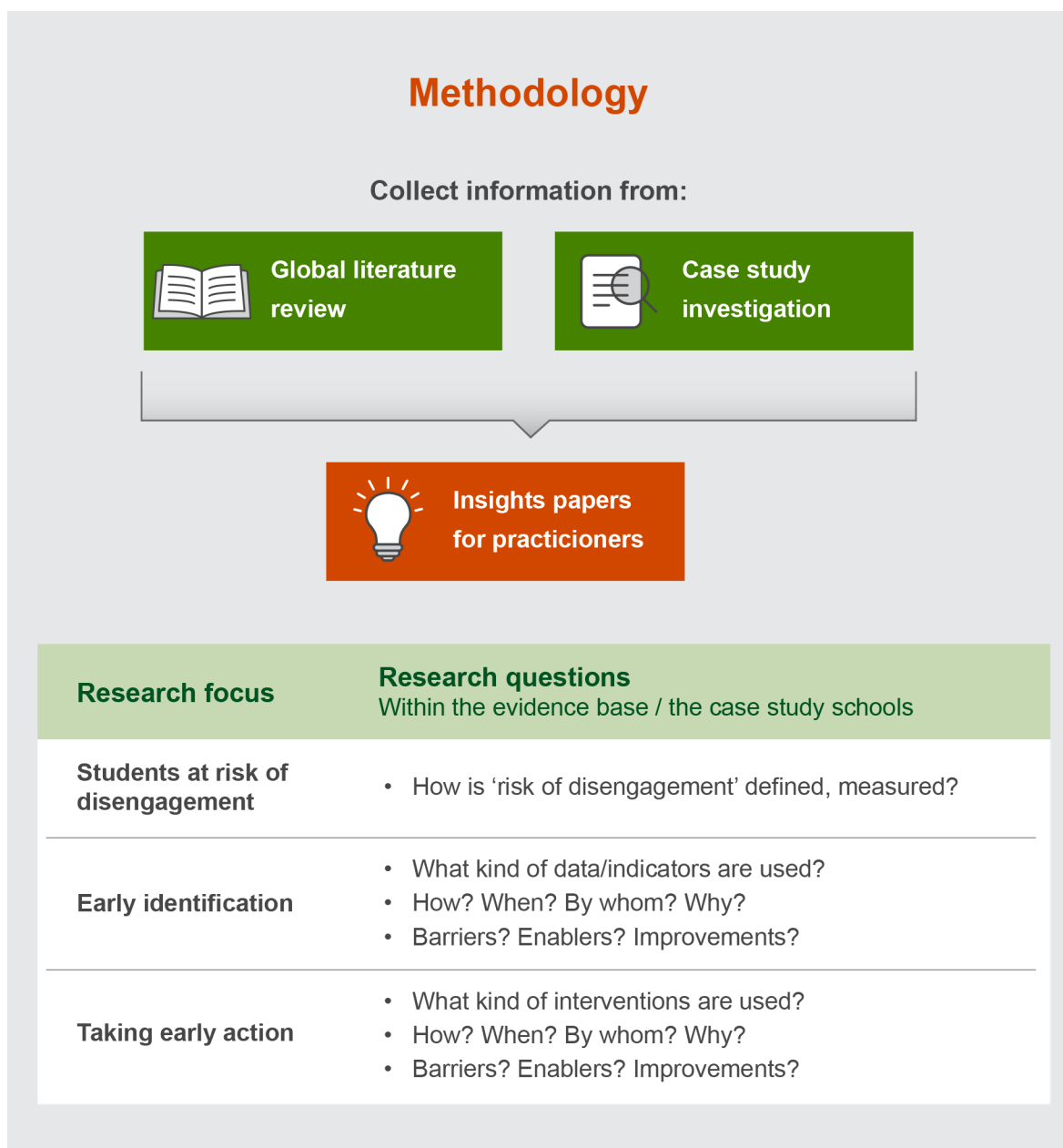
A review of 40 Australian and international research papers to identify:

 - a. factors that can help to predict risk of disengagement
 - b. essential data needed to make an early identification of students at risk of disengagement
 - c. effective early intervention processes and strategies used to prevent disengagement.
2. Case study investigation⁵


Ten Victorian public schools representing a diversity of school demographics, and in varying locations within the state, agreed to be the case study schools. These schools were known to be working with students at risk of disengagement. The aim of the case study investigation was to explore how selected Victorian schools were:

 - a. defining and identifying students at risk of disengagement
 - b. taking early action in relation to such students
 - c. seeking to improve their work in this area.

Figure 1.3: Insights for Early Action Research Project methodology



Importantly, the project did not aim to provide a complete picture of the activities of all Victorian schools regarding students at risk of disengagement nor to provide a detailed analysis of the data collection methods used by the ten case study schools. A review of the efficacy of identification and intervention processes, strategies and technology used by schools to address disengagement was also outside the scope of the project.



For more detailed information on the methodology see: Appendix A: Global literature review and case study investigation methodology.

1.4 Defining ‘disengagement’

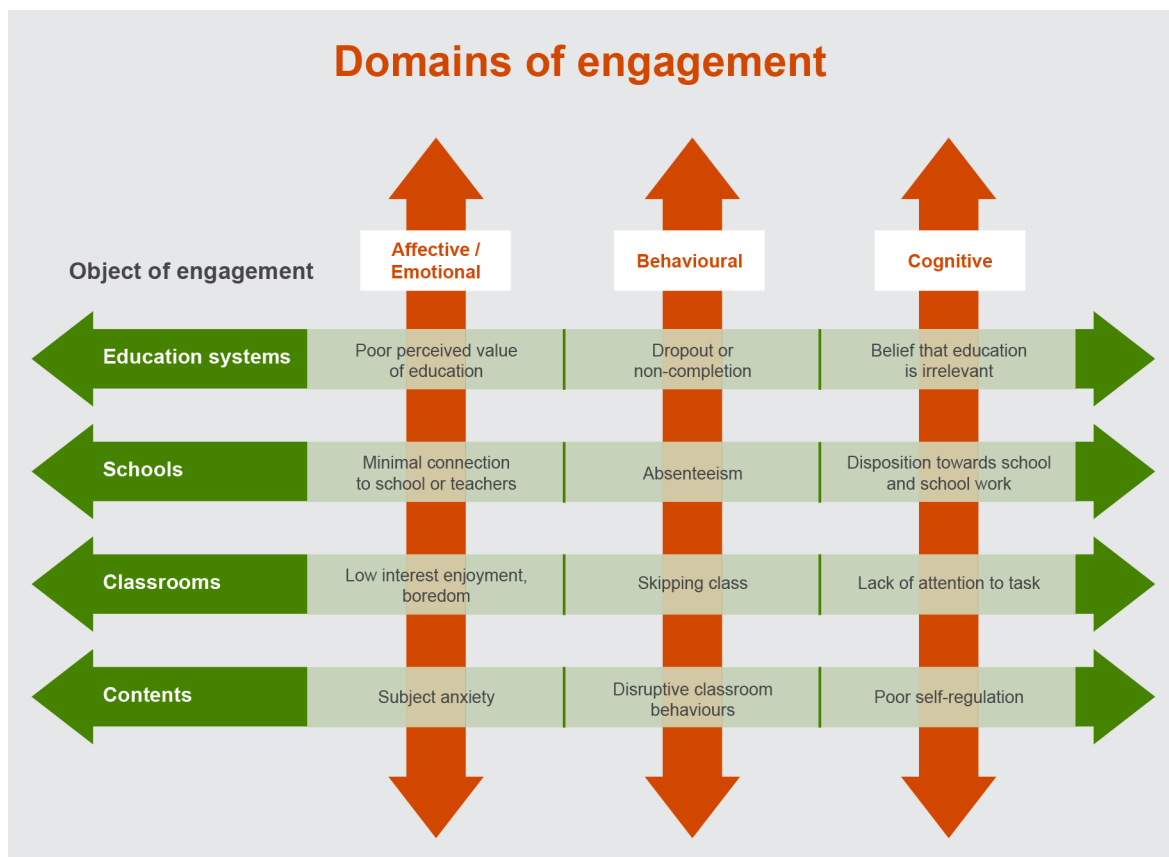
Student engagement and disengagement is challenging to define as it is influenced by multiple, interrelated factors. Disengagement should be considered as a continuum of experience that students move along, rather than a set state of being. The Department broadly considers a student to be disengaged in education when they:

- are not enrolled or attending school regularly
- do not participate in all areas of the school (that is, academic, social and extracurricular activities)
- do not feel included in, or have a sense of belonging to, the school
- are not personally invested in and taking ownership of their learning.⁶

Hancock and Zubrick⁷ frame disengagement in terms of a small number of clear statements that also convey a sense of its breadth and complexity (see Figure 1.1). They make it clear that student disengagement:

- can occur at different levels within education – such as with the class content, the classroom itself, the school and or the education system in general
- can involve different dimensions – students can become disengaged across a range of different domains such as emotional disengagement, behavioural or cognitive disengagement
- is both a process and an outcome – for example, while poor attendance may reflect disengagement from school, it is also a risk factor for other disengagement indicators such as early school leaving
- is shaped by wider influences – contexts beyond the school and educational setting, such as family, are an integral part of disengagement processes for children and young people.

Figure 1.1: Domains of engagement



Source: Hancock and Zubrick (2015)⁸ © Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

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Victorian case study school interviewees were asked about the meaning of the term 'at risk of disengagement' in their school context. Some participants talked about the challenge of distinguishing between 'disengagement' and 'at risk of disengagement':

“ They may be blurred into each other – at risk, they are still attending school and it's about working out what those barriers are that could be affecting them; disengaged, they have already given up.

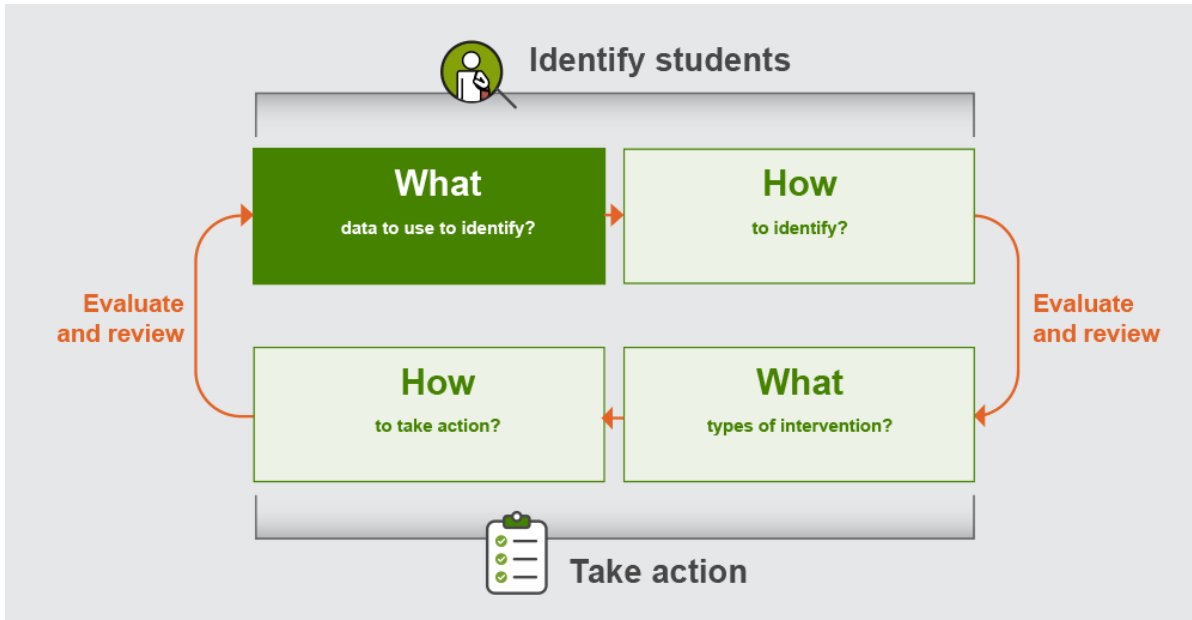
(Secondary school social worker)

Interviewees from a number of case study schools viewed 'at risk of disengagement' in terms of a number of 'risk factors' or 'vulnerability factors' as follows:

- home environment (10 schools)
- mental health issues (10 schools)
- lack of connection with a significant adult (9 schools)
- lack of academic success or aspiration (8 schools)
- changes in or for a young person (4 schools).

These were factors that staff in the case study schools felt could individually, or in combination, increase the chances of students becoming disengaged.

2 What data can schools use to identify students at risk of disengagement?



2.1 Predictors of disengagement

The global research on the predictors of disengagement (school dropout) is long standing and well established. It suggests three levels of predictors for school dropout: student, family, and school. Associated with each predictor are factors that reflect specific reasons why students disengage or drop out from school.



What are predictors?

Predictors are used 'to correctly identify the students who will drop out, without mistakenly flagging students who would have graduated anyway [...] missing students who are actually at risk of dropping out'.

Research shows that the most accurate dropout predictors examine trajectories of student achievement (e.g. mathematics achievement from grades 7–12) or student engagement (e.g. student engagement trajectories from grades 8–12) over long periods of time.

The next most accurate type of dropout predictors are those based on simple cross-sectional, school-based data such as grades. It is more accurate to combine multiple predictors to cast the net wide (i.e. select students who have predictor x or predictor y rather than just selecting students who have predictor x and predictor y).

Source: Bowers, A., Sprott, R., & Taff, S. (2012/13)⁹

Student-level factors

There is considerable research evidence about student-related factors that influence school disengagement. The strongest predictors of disengagement identified in the global literature review were educational performance, student behaviour, demographic factors and student attitudinal factors as described below.

1. **Educational performance** (e.g. test scores)

The research literature identified that students' educational performance is the most powerful predictor of future school disengagement.¹⁰ Poor academic performance (particularly in English and Mathematics) and lack of progression through the grade levels, particularly in primary and middle school, also strengthens the chance of a student not completing school.¹¹

2. **Student behaviour** (e.g. attendance)

The research literature identified both overt and subtle student behaviours that could lead to disengagement. In particular, high absenteeism, misbehaviour in secondary school, delinquent behaviour outside of secondary school, secondary school suspension histories, drug or alcohol use during high school, teenage parenting and childbearing, and having friends who engage in criminal behaviour or friends who have dropped out were significant predictors of dropout.¹²

Some studies also highlighted the importance of adolescent mental health (e.g. feeling depressed, lonely, sad) and more subtle forms of withdrawal (e.g. quiet students, exclusion from friendship groups) in relation to predicting disengagement.¹³

3. **Demographic factors** (e.g. gender)

The research literature identified the influence of gender, ethnic background and disability as important demographic predictors of dropout from school.¹⁴ The research suggests that boys are more likely to disengage with schooling than girls, and students from non-English speaking backgrounds are less likely to complete school than those from English speaking backgrounds. Students with disabilities have much higher dropout rates than students without disabilities.¹⁵

4. **Attitudinal factors** (e.g. educational expectations)

There are fewer research studies on student attitudinal predictors of disengagement such as student's beliefs, values and attitudes. However, three Australian studies¹⁶ found that a student's educational aspirations (how far in school a student expects to go) has a substantial effect on whether the student completes Year 12.

Family-level factors

Family socio-economic status and educational support are important predictors of dropout, alongside other factors such as educational performance and engagement.

1. **Family socio-economic status** (e.g. poverty)

Several international and Australian studies referenced socio-economic status as an important predictor of disengagement.¹⁷ The predictive influence of socio-economic status comes after academic performance and student behaviour in some studies.¹⁸ Poverty, a student's age, gender, attendance level and test scores **in combination**, were all significant predictors of school completion.¹⁹

2. **Family educational support** (e.g. parental support, stress, educational aspirations)

Research has found that parent involvement – how involved parents are with the student and his or her academic performance – was one of four important variables most predictive of high school dropout.²⁰ An Australian study examined parental aspirations for their child's education, finding that this was also an important predictor of school completion.²¹ Family stress, such as changes in family structure or illness, increase the odds of dropping out from school.²²

School-level factors

School-level characteristics are generally limited predictors of dropout when compared to other factors.

1. **School-level characteristics** (e.g. school resources, education programs)

Student dropout rates vary in significant ways between different types of schools. However, when school-related factors such as school resources, education program, governance, and teacher quality and peer relationships are examined alongside other influences, the findings suggest that these factors are far less important than student-related and family-related factors as predictors of dropout.²³

A 2012 Australian study found that 'school characteristics and resources had hardly any effect on students completing Year 12, with the exception of the extent of adequacy of school physical facilities, which is marginally positively associated with completion'.²⁴ Another Australian study of Victorian schools examined student and school factors on reaching Year 12 and found that 'much of the variation between individual schools in reaching Year 12 can be attributed to differences in the social, socioeconomic and academic profiles of their students'.²⁵

2. **Classroom climate** (e.g. teacher attitudes)

While there is a limited relationship between school characteristics and Year 12 completion rates in general, it does not mean that all aspects of school are unimportant. Some research studies highlight the importance of specific aspects of schooling, in particular, classroom and school climate, and teacher attitudes. A Canadian study found that a negative classroom climate might contribute to school dropout. A negative classroom climate was revealed by 'the student's perception of a lack of order and organization in the classroom, limited student engagement in class activities and a global negative perception of the classroom social environment'.²⁶ An Australian study highlighted the importance of teachers in promoting a positive learning culture in low-socio-economic status (SES) schools to improve completion rates.²⁷

2.2 What educators from Victorian schools say?

Interviewees in the case studies identified the influence of the home environment as the most important indicator of the risk of disengagement. Emphasis was placed on how disengagement risk 'starts at home' through the influence of factors relating to 'family background', 'family issues', 'trauma background' and other factors.

There were six main 'at risk' indicators that were being used by all of the case study schools:

1. attendance (e.g. early signs of attendance falling below 90%)
2. behaviour (e.g. dysfunctional extreme behaviours or a change in a student's behaviour)
3. academic progress (e.g. low levels of progress or major gaps in understanding)
4. family issues (e.g. family conflict, mental health, trauma)
5. wellbeing (e.g. student mental health issues)
6. engagement (e.g. students 'flying under the radar', quiet disengagement).

Additionally, two indicators were being used in some, but not all, schools and related to:

1. aspirations (e.g. low parental expectations in relation to education)
2. transitions (e.g. pre-school or primary school data highlighting potential issues).

As one primary school Principal explained, '... these factors are "red flags" that could add up to something, so if we are alerted earlier it makes our job easier to identify the possible risk of disengagement'.

Case study school examples

CASE STUDY SCHOOL 1: BACKGROUND

This is a large school that emerged as a single entity with several campuses after an amalgamation in the last decade. Demographic changes in that time have impacted the school both positively ('new arrivals, higher aspiration families') and negatively ('students suffering trauma, family violence, drug and alcohol abuse'). There has also been a change in the socio-economic status of families with 78% of the school population now in the bottom ICSEA quartile. Many families are also highly mobile, transient families: 'So quite a shift in the population. If we could keep them here we could see some improvements. This is the bottom quartile we are talking about. We are not able to track the students who are leaving'. Key challenges faced by the school include 'upskilling the staff and constant changes in school population with outgoing and incoming families, particularly in the bottom quartile'

Grade range	Enrolment	SFOE Index	SES BQ	Indigenous students	LBOTE students	Attendance rate
P-9/12	1965	High	78%	7%	30%	89%

IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
Indicators		
Attendance	✓	Compass: flags at 90% and 80%; Attendance Officer
Behaviour	✓	Compass; SWPBS plan; student wellbeing meetings, Team Around the Learner
Academic	✓	Compass; reporting cycle each six weeks
Family issues	✓	Enrolment form, staff observation, student wellbeing meetings, Team Around the Learner
Wellbeing	✓	Staff observations, student wellbeing meetings, Team Around the Learner
Engagement	✓	Staff observations
Aspirations		
Transitions		
Tools		
SIMS	✓	Compass
Surveys	✓	Student Attitudes to School survey; early years survey
Bespoke spreadsheet	✓	Team Around the Learner Tier 3 Data Spreadsheet
Key		
Compass: Education management software		SFOE: Student Family Occupation Education
ICSEA: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage		SIMS: School Information Management Systems
LBOTE: Language background other than English		SWPBS: School-wide positive behaviour support
SES BQ: Socio-economic status bottom quartile		

CASE STUDY SCHOOL 6: BACKGROUND

While classified as a medium SFEO indexed area, 46% families in this small primary school are in the bottom (ICSEA rated) SES quarter. Many of the families have experienced generational or long-term unemployment and are dependent on welfare payments. As one interviewee described: 'Lack of role modelling by parents is a big factor. We know that in our community that parents haven't finished high school.' The Principal also commented on an increase in 'deficit in oral language and experiences, and ... in children being identified on the autism spectrum [over] the last 5–6 years'. In preventing disengagement, all the staff interviewed stressed that the most important element was the relationship with the families. The Principal explained, 'There might not be an attendance issue but we know that there are family issues so if that child misses one day that may be a flag straight up and we will make contact straight away. It's about knowing your school community and your students.'

Grade range	Enrolment	SFOE Index	SES BQ	Indigenous students	LBOTE students	Attendance rate
P-6	148	Medium	46%	9%	3%	79%











































IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
Indicators		
Attendance	✓	Sentra: 'We monitor late attendance and absenteeism, from 1st day absent'
Behaviour	✓	Sentra: Teachers observations
Academic	✓	Sentra: Significantly below or above expectant levels
Family issues	✓	Enrolment process; teacher observations
Wellbeing	✓	Teacher observations
Engagement	✓	Teacher observations
Aspirations		Teacher observations
Transitions		Linked to local early child education schools and high school
Tools		
SIMS	✓	Sentra; data wall
Surveys	✓	Student Attitudes to School survey
Bespoke spreadsheet	✓	Online mark book (uploaded into Sentra regularly)
Key		
ICSEA: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage LBOTE: Language background other than English Sentra: Education management software SES BQ: Socio-economic status bottom quartile		SFOE: Student Family Occupation Education SIMS: School Information Management Systems SWPBS: School-wide positive behaviour support

Table 2.1 Indicators of disengagement drawn from the research literature and case study practice

Predictors of disengagement

There are some strong predictors of disengagement based on research evidence. These are used as indicators of disengagement in a number of case study schools in Victoria.

Level	Category	Strength of predictor	Predictor type	No. of research studies	No. of case study schools
 Student	Educational performance		Academic progress	 	
			School attendance	 	
	Behaviour		School behaviour		
			Social behaviour (peers)	 	
			Relationships with adults		
			Personal factors (gender, mental health, social and emotional wellbeing)	 	
	Demographic factors		Ethnic background	 	
			Disability		
			Teenage parenting and childbearing		
	Attitudinal factors		Educational aspirations		
 Family	Family demographics		Socio-economic status		
			Family stress		
	Educational support		Parent educational support and aspirations		
 School	School environment		School level factors are generally limited predictors of disengagement; however, some specific factors such as school climate and teacher attitudes may be important predictors.		

The information in this infographic has been drawn from a global literature review and a case study investigation conducted by Monash University for the **Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership**.

Access the global literature review and summary of the case study schools at: www.bastow.vic.edu.au/learning-resources/publications

Key




















-  Strong predictor of dropout
-  Moderate predictor of dropout
-  Limited predictor of dropout
-  High (20+ studies)
-  Medium (10-20 studies)
-  Low (1-10 studies)
-  Used by all or most case study schools
-  Used by some case study schools
-  Used by a few case study schools
-  Includes Australian studies

Table 2.2 Signs of disengagement – overt and subtle

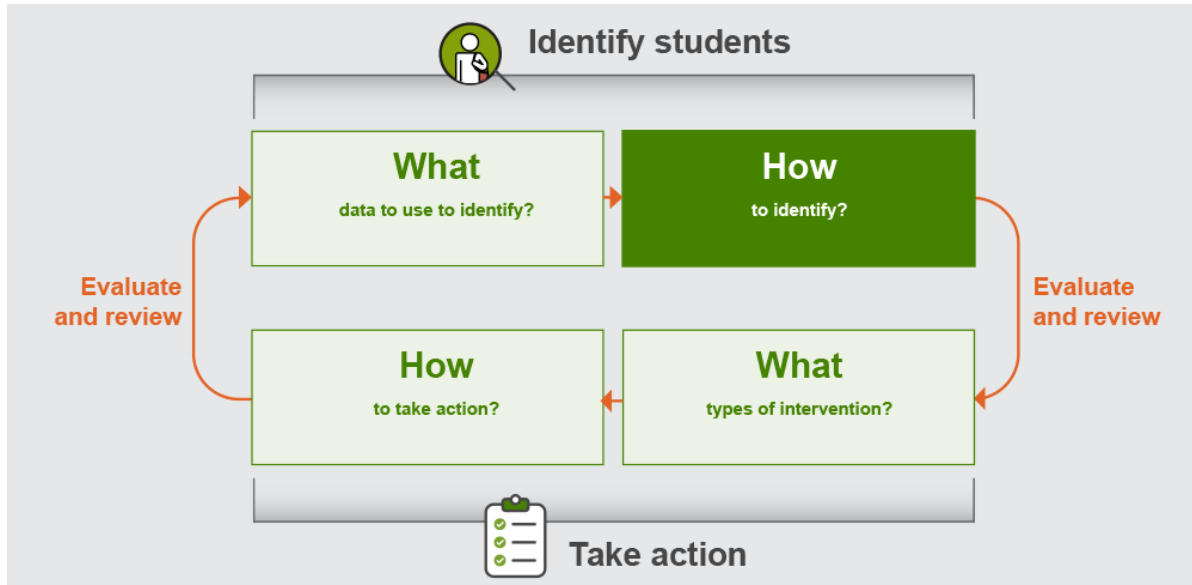
Signs of disengagement

There are a number of overt and subtle signs of disengagement, and some examples of these are provided below.

Level	Category	Predictor type	Overt	Subtle
 Student		Academic progress	Falling behind or ahead by 12 months or more. Low reading levels in Prep – Year 3	Lack of interest or confidence in subject and assessment tasks, late submission, poor effort etc.
		School attendance	Poor attendance (below 90%). Expulsion or suspension	Late to class
		School behaviour	Repeated, documented serious behaviour incidents	Low-level misbehaviour in class
		Social behaviour (peers)	Negative and anti-social behaviour, (e.g. smoking, drug or alcohol use)	Social withdrawal or limited connections to peers.
		Relationships with adults	No connection with any adult in the school	Avoids asking for assistance from adults in or outside the school
		Personal factors (gender, mental health, social and emotional wellbeing)	Diagnosed mental health issue	Shows some signs of poor social and emotional wellbeing
		Ethnic background	Identifies as a student from a non-English speaking background or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background	
		Disability	Diagnosed with a disability	Has an undiagnosed disability
	 Family		Socio-economic status	Unemployed parents, unstable housing situation
Family stress			Recent changes to family structure, school aware of additional needs of parents (e.g. disability)	Poor relationship with parents
		Parent educational support and aspirations	Parents are not engaged in any school activities or support for schooling (e.g. lack of attendance at school events, poor support for homework, lack of communication with school)	In discussions with teachers, students exhibit little motivation that their schooling will enhance their future possibilities
 School		School-level factors are generally limited predictors although some specific factors such as school climate and teacher attitudes may be important predictors.	School characteristics e.g. school climate, resources available to support at-risk students	A student's perception of the school and classroom climate
			Clear emphasis on school culture to motivate students	A student's perception of the learning culture in the school

There are many types of overt and subtle signs that educators may observe in students. A student may exhibit a combination of signs and educators should use their professional judgement as to whether a student is at risk of disengagement.

3 How can schools develop processes to support early identification?



Emerging research suggests that schools should monitor all students in order to identify and proactively intervene with those who show early signs of disengagement. How schools design and implement a process and use tools to identify students at risk of disengagement depends on their local context. However, there are insights from the literature review and the case study schools that may provide some guidance and examples for school leaders, teachers and wellbeing staff about how to go about this process.

3.1 Collecting the data

The research evidence indicates that a mix of quantitative and qualitative data is important to accurately identify students at risk of disengagement.

The processes for the identification of students at risk of disengagement involves the collection, analysis, and evaluation of information from many sources. This may include, for example:

- quantitative data (e.g. enrolment, transition, assessment, observation, referral date and survey data)
- leadership, support and advice from a wide range of school staff and other professionals (e.g. senior leaders, middle leaders, teaching staff, support staff, social workers, student support service staff, school nurse)
- Conversations, consultations, corroborations and cooperation gained through various forums and contexts (e.g. team, wellbeing, leadership, student referral and transition meetings).

“Compass [student information management system] data is the trigger but it’s the conversations [with the students] where you get all the information about what is going on with them. [...] You can jump to all sorts of conclusions, it’s just a set of data, but it’s talking to the children that gets you the honest answers.

(Assistant Principal)

The case study schools used the following methods to collect data about at-risk students:

1. **Teacher observation:** use of varied forums and contexts (e.g. team, wellbeing, leadership, student referral and transition meetings)
2. **Face-to-face interviews:** discussion with the student and/or their family; direct contact with the student and/or families to better understand circumstances and reasons for disengagement
3. **Surveys:** for example, Student Attitudes to School survey, student wellbeing survey, early years survey
4. **Consultation:** with a wide range of school staff and other professionals (e.g. senior leaders, middle leaders, teaching staff, support staff, social workers, careers coordinator, student support service staff)
5. **Gap analysis (current/past):** a broad understanding of the extent of a school's issues with attendance, behaviour management and learning, and the disadvantage the students experience as a result of disability or socio-economic background
6. **School-wide positive behaviour support (SWPBS):** a whole-school framework that provides school professionals with an evidence-based approach to promote improved behaviour at their school; Self-Assessment Survey (SAS) and the Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI).











“ Data is collected from fortnightly meetings attended by the Assistant Principal, the learning partner on each campus and mentor teachers. We look at the State-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) referral process, conversations with parents, and access Compass [student information management system] to look at attendance, learning and behaviour data. We also use external data for our Early Years work ... data from [Early Year Centre] families, feedback from families about what they see as their own needs and their children in their early years; this is a new survey we have developed.

(Campus Leader, P–9/12 school)

Case study schools used tools ranging from large-scale data management systems and systemic whole-school strategies to individualised learning planners and subjective assessments by well-trained staff. Two main early warning tools are used by the case study schools:

7. **School information management systems (SIMS)** such as Compass and Sentra are used in almost all case study schools to track and analyse students' attendance, behaviour and academic progress along with CASES21. Some case study schools set thresholds to create an alert (or 'red flag') for negative changes in indicators such as attendance, unexplained absences and behaviour issues.
CASES21 is the software component of the Computerised Administrative System Environment for Schools that facilitates an exchange of data between schools and the Department, and student support administration, financial management and reporting to meet legislative, regulatory and operational requirements. The benefit of these data sharing systems is the ability for staff to access data about students through either reports or by viewing it online. The level of data accessible to school personnel is relational to their position in the school; for example, principal, wellbeing officer and classroom teacher.
8. **Bespoke spreadsheets of data and resources** are designed and used in several case study schools to collate and share additional data such as transition data, individualised education plans (IEP), behaviour support plans, Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), mental health plans, student support groups, performance assessments, attendance, student mentoring program, and the program for students with disabilities. A spreadsheet may be used in conjunction with the collection and analysis of data within SIMS.

Table 3.1 Examples of how case study schools collect data

<h2 style="text-align: center;">Collection of data</h2> <p style="text-align: center;">Examples of how 10 Victorian case study schools collect information on indicators of disengagement</p>			
Level	Category of predictor	Type of data	Data assets
 Student	 Educational performance	Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current and previous student performance reports (internal and external to the school) • National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) • Victorian Assessment Software System (VASS)
	 Behaviour	Enrolment and attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data on student attendance through student information management systems including information on unexplained absences • Information about suspension and/or expulsion history
		Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information from previous schools • Previous student performance reports (e.g. from CASES21)
		Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recorded behaviour, conversations and attitudinal responses of the students (or other information collected as part of school-wide Positive Behaviour Support initiatives) • General observations from teachers and wellbeing staff
	 Attitudinal factors  Demographic factors	Referral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral information from previous schools, classroom teachers, wellbeing staff or other agencies • Documented outcomes of a student referral meeting
 Attitudinal factors		Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access information from the annual Victorian Department of Education 'Attitudes to School' survey
 Demographic factors  Educational support			
 School	 School environment		

These are selected examples from 10 Victorian case study schools. This list is not exhaustive and there may be other information that is important for schools to collect based on their particular context. Schools should decide which information is most important and efficient for them to collect with respect to student engagement and disengagement.

Access case study school summaries at www.bastow.vic.edu.au/learning-resources/publications

3.2 Implementing a process for early identification

The research literature and case study schools offer several insights on implementing a process to assist the early identification of students at risk of disengagement.

The research literature recommends that processes are:

- focused on specific key indicators but also flexible to local contexts
- based on system-level and local data but also use practitioner expertise and judgement
- timely for early prevention but also rigorous for accuracy
- targeted to those at most risk but also monitoring all students
- practical and easy to use but also building new skills and capabilities for staff to identify students at risk
- supportive and inclusive school cultures
- focused on early identification and early intervention.

The following guidance on implementing a process for early identification builds on this research literature and lessons learnt from the case study schools.

Build a shared understanding of the meaning of disengagement

A shared language and understanding between schools, education authorities, and support agencies about the meaning of disengagement is important to create consistency of practice within and across schools and agencies.

Focus on certain key indicators

The early identification process should be focused on key indicators (e.g. attendance, behaviour and achievement) that are collected regularly and accurately.²⁸ Schools should set early identification benchmarks that 'flag' when a student is at risk, for example: daily attendance of 90 percent or less; three or more days of suspension; failing English or Mathematics. School staff should follow up on these benchmarks by meeting regularly to monitor or to intervene for students,²⁹ using data as a starting point, not an end point.

Use quantitative data in combination with teacher judgement

Teachers can be quite accurate in their predictions of dropout as they often have additional information that cannot be captured in quantitative data, such as academic tenacity.³⁰ Quantitative data should be used in combination with teacher intuition and observation, for example, student performance or attendance records, or if a student self-reports their intention to leave school.³¹ Case study interviewees confirmed the relationship between teacher knowledge about the student and the identification of at risk based on quantitative data. Ongoing monitoring and recording of data on a student's profile should be completed by a member of staff who knows the student well.³²

Build the moral purpose and motivation for earlier identification

The research literature suggested each school should build a school-wide culture that values the moral purpose and motivation for early identification. A process to predict at-risk students needs to be part of a regular cycle of data used by school leaders, teachers and wellbeing officers. This data collection and sharing process should be actively endorsed and supported across all levels of leadership.³³ Case study interviewees identified the importance of all teachers accepting responsibility for identifying and supporting at-risk students.

Allocate time, resources and professional development for the identification process

Professional development should be provided for the team of personnel involved in the process of identifying risk factors, collecting data, and actioning interventions. This professional development should be particularly aligned to support the roles and responsibilities of each team member and their processes for analysing and using data.³⁴ Case study interviewees recommend prioritising resources, time and space for relevant staff to liaise closely with at-risk students; and the importance of investing in staff training so that all personnel understand the challenges of at-risk students and the early signs of disengagement.

Share information between schools and with other agencies

The research literature identified that there are distinct benefits for early identification when schools and external support organisations (e.g. local authorities and local government agencies) collaborate on data collection practices, particularly transition data, about vulnerable young people.³⁵ Schools and local organisations should share and modify data to develop agreed 'at risk' indicators, and use this data to 'pick up' overlooked at-risk young people.³⁶ A collaborative data collection practice between schools, council and government agencies was described in one Australian study. The study used the premise that 'transition from primary to high school is an important cusp point for early intervention against educational disengagement'; and outlined a case in which local councils 'identified a high number of young people both at risk of and currently disengaged from local education opportunities ...'³⁷

Case study interviewees highlighted the importance of improving links and information flows between schools and local agencies to better identify students at risk of disengagement. Interviewees identified the importance of increased resourcing, opportunities and time for networking (particularly, attending meetings and networking with staff), targeting different ages and stages of at-risk students, and formalising (e.g. developing memorandums of understandings) links with external organisations that work with specific types of students and/or families.

Monitor all students over time

By monitoring all students, schools can intervene proactively when students show early signs of attendance, behaviour, or academic issues.³⁸ The aim of this monitoring is to increase precision when collecting data, provide insight about student behaviour, and review teacher judgement as intuition that risk factors are present in a student's attitude and behaviour.³⁹ The most accurate predictors display a trend analysis, are developed over time, and use multiple, non-overlapping indicators (e.g. low attendance or poor behaviour, rather than low attendance and poor behaviour).⁴⁰ Case study interviewees recommended that early identification should start in primary school. They also suggested the need to balance the sensitivity of sharing



Reflective questions

1. How do you and other staff at your school define student disengagement and being 'at risk' of disengagement?
2. What are the ways in which you might engage with wellbeing staff and Victorian Department of Education and Training regional staff in the early identification of students at risk of disengagement?
3. How might you and other staff work more closely with neighbouring schools and agencies to improve early identification of students at risk of disengagement?
4. What kinds of professional learning might you and other staff at your school undertake to support the collection, analysis and monitoring of data, and to work effectively with at-risk students?

student information and labelling students as at risk, with the need for school-based professionals to be as informed as soon as possible about potential issues for all students.

Example process (to be adapted by schools)

The research literature suggests an example process using the following steps:

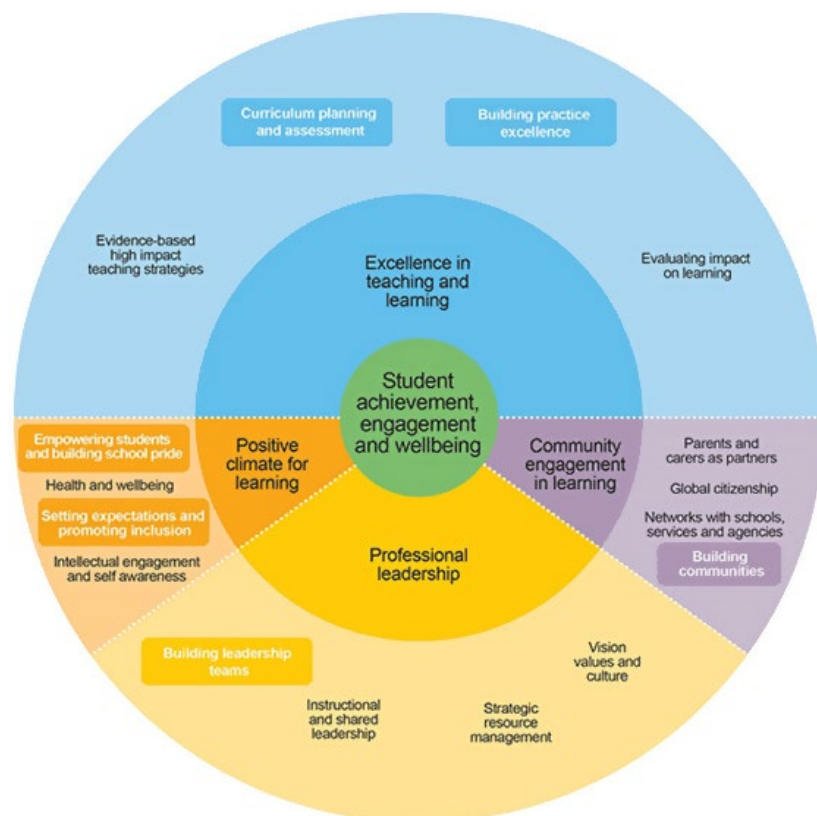
1. organise and analyse data to identify students who miss school, have behaviour problems, or are struggling in their learning
2. intervene with students who show early signs of falling 'off track'
3. if data shows high rates of absenteeism, take steps to help students, parents and school staff understand the importance of attending school daily
4. Monitor progress and adjust interventions as needed.⁴¹

The steps below elaborate this monitoring process into a set of actions that schools can take. The monitoring process is mapped to the Department's Framework for Improving Student Outcomes improvement cycle (FISO) (Figure 3.1) at Figure 3.2 Process to identify and intervene for students at risk of disengagement.

1. Review which indicators of disengagement to use
2. Organise data and information collection
3. Analyse data to identify students at risk
4. Collect additional information to verify whether a student is at risk
5. Take action
6. Monitor and evaluate

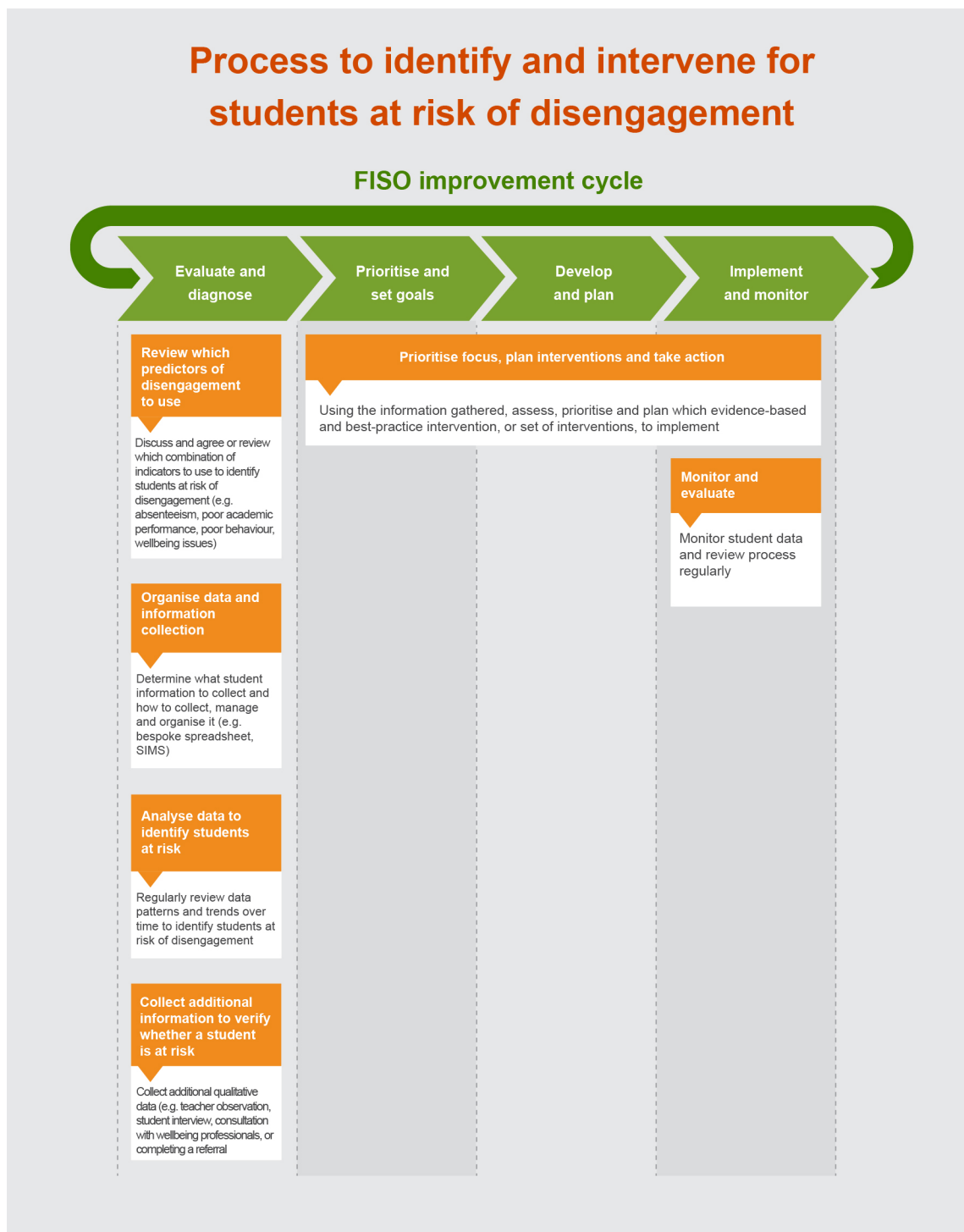
The suggested actions from the research are situated predominately within the *Evaluate and Diagnose* stage due to the nature of the identification process.

Figure 3.1 Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO)



Source: Department of Education and Training Victoria⁴²

Figure 3.2 Process to identify and intervene for students at risk of disengagement





Case study scenario: A Principal's leadership

'We have regular student referral meetings. The teachers fill in a referral form which goes to the Wellbeing Officer, who brings those forms to the referral meeting where we discuss concerns and priorities, who's doing what, etc.

We have a Wellbeing Meeting every fortnight after school, which is run by the Assistant Principal and attended by the Year Level Coordinators, Campus Managers, Wellbeing Officer and anyone else we can pull in at the time. Then we go through anyone of concern at every year level – including looking at data from the Attendance Officer.

I [Principal] meet with our Student Support Service Officer (SSSO) every Tuesday. They have access through the Department of our attendance data and student surveys.

We have a Police Liaison Officer here twice a week, and he informs me what is happening in the community. We don't know when there's been a large drop of drugs, but the police do and they say 'Guess what, you'll have no active parenting for three days'. It's that early identification, it's like a jigsaw puzzle. The older kids, they'll get into that routine [of being away], because mum's on the couch and it's easy to stay away, so I need to know before all that stuff happens.

The School Nurse has a good relationship with a local psychologist and paediatrician, so she keeps her own data on Compass that we can look at from her point of view i.e. from a medical perspective. I meet with her as needed.

Leading Teachers bring in data every week. There are 12 of them. I ask if there is anyone they are concerned with mentally, physical, academically, and I ask for an update of their academic results. And if they have been away from school or have gone home, I ask 'Why are they away, have you contacted the parents? It's a constant cycle of trying to stay informed.'

(Principal, P-9/12 school)

3.3 Enabling conditions: checklist for schools

There are general conditions that support schools to establish effective processes for the early identification of students at risk of disengagement. These conditions are generally good practices in schools and were recommended by the case study interviewees as enablers or barriers to the implementation of early identification and intervention processes (in addition to the specific guidance to establish identification processes described above).

This paper does not provide detailed instructions for creating these enabling conditions, but it does point to some relevant resources from the Department as a starting point for schools.

✔ Use of a student information management system and tools to collate, analyse and continuously monitor data

Practices

- Collate and analyse student-level data using a student information management system (early and continuous monitoring esp. of attendance). A computerised data tracking system was strongly valued by case study schools, especially in relation to automated responses to absences, the ability to produce reports and alert staff to incidents straight away.
- Capture information about prior behaviour/interventions from feeder schools in the student information management system

“ It’s that early monitoring, so where we’ve got a kid who is starting to miss classes we’ll go onto an attendance type tracker or have regular parent meetings, so we’ll call in family support conferences. [...] If we can get those things into place, we can generally get some re-engagement occurring quickly, back on track, showing that we’re interested.

(Lead Teacher)

Department of Education and Training Victoria resources
[Student mapping tool](#)

✔ School leadership and culture that prioritises student inclusion and engagement

Practices

- Strong leadership and school-wide culture that prioritises student inclusion and engagement through school-wide processes such as a vertical, or house, system to focus on increasing engagement and aspiration

“ The holistic approach across the school has created a fostering environment where it’s conducive to a growing and learning environment.

(Principal)

“ You have to be really committed to the moral imperative of education and that differs for people’s experience and understanding. There is no quick fix and no quick wins. It takes a long time and means investing money and resources.

(Principal)

Department of Education and Training Victoria resources
FISO: [Dimension – vision, values and culture](#)

✔ Positive and interactive relationships with families and community members

Practices

- Encouraging staff to build trusted relationships with family and community members that are proactive, positive and interactive
- Following up with families when difficult situations arise

“ There might not be an attendance issue but we know that there are family issues so if that child misses one day that may be a flag straight up and we will make contact straight away. It’s about knowing your school community and your students.

(Principal)

Department of Education and Training Victoria resources

Bastow Institute Professional Learning Course: [Partnering to Improve Learning Working with families](#)

✔ High-quality professional development in related skills, for example, trauma-informed practice, data literacy, school-wide positive behaviour support

Practices

- Developing staff capabilities in data collection, analysis and associated tools
- Developing staff capabilities in school-wide positive behaviour support and or trauma-informed practice

“ The Berry Street training⁴³, looking at the impact that trauma and mental health has on students, and the staff making the connection between a student learning and their attendance and their mental health, has made a huge difference to the culture at the school.

(Social worker)

Department of Education and Training Victoria resources

[School-wide positive behaviour support](#) (SWPBS)

✔ Access to specialist support staff, school-based wellbeing teams or external agencies

Practices

- Creation of wellbeing teams in the school to support identification processes
- Use of specialist support staff to help identify students at risk of disengagement
- Stronger associations with external support organisations and community programs to identify factors of disengagement

“ Disengagement happens at many levels throughout our whole community and our aim for this school is to be a hub for the community and also to develop partnerships outside our school gate because we all deal with the same families.

(Principal)

Department of Education and Training Victoria resources

[Health and wellbeing staff in schools](#)

✔ Primary to secondary school transition programs that enable communication between primary and secondary schools

Practices

- Formal primary to secondary school transition programs that enable dialogue and data sharing between teachers to identify at-risk students

“Developing links with primary schools, making stronger connections. There is an intake form we provide to all current Year 6 teachers. They send that back and then we go to the schools.” (Acting Student Engagement, Wellbeing and Transitions Leader (middle leadership team))

Department of Education and Training Victoria resources

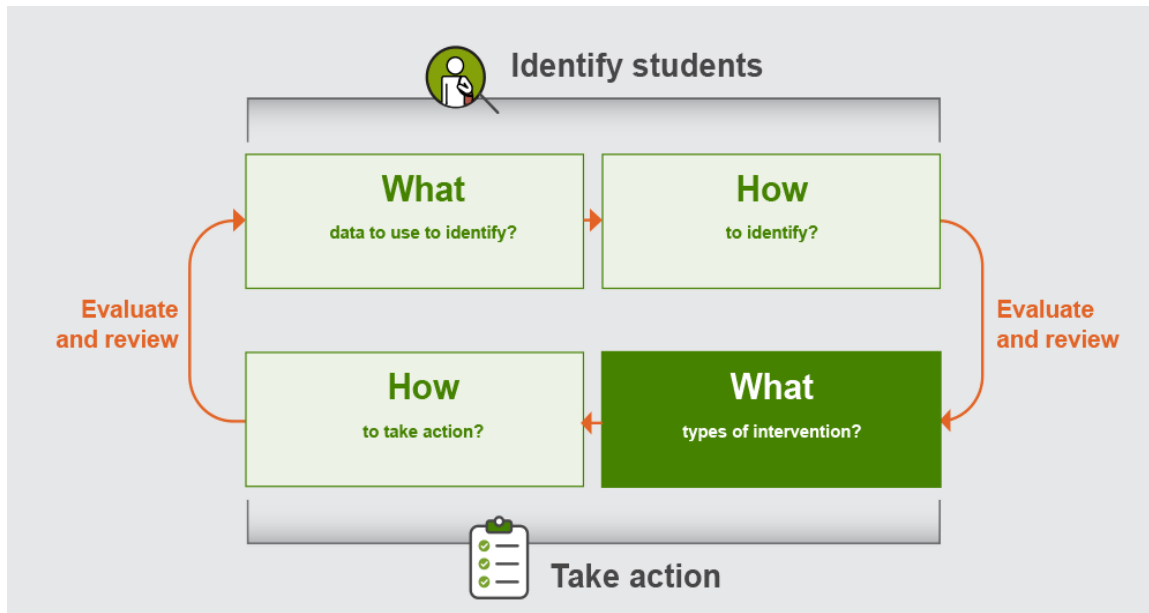
[Transition for vulnerable students:](#)



Supporting resource

Find a checklist of enabling conditions for the early identification of students at risk of disengagement and for intervention processes at Appendix B: Enablers for identification and intervention processes. The resource lists those enablers unique to identification and those unique to interventions and those applicable to both processes.

4 What types of interventions can schools consider?



Emerging research and evaluation on the use of data to identify students at risk of disengagement suggests that schools can usefully develop early warning systems that monitor all students in order to identify and proactively intervene with those who show early signs of attendance, behaviour or academic problems. Case study schools identified three levels of interventions (community, school and student) to assist students to re-engage with their education.

While this section does not provide a review or evaluation of the efficacy of these interventions, it does provide a snapshot of what activities case study schools are undertaking to support students at risk of disengagement.

4.1 Features of evidence-based interventions

There are research-informed insights from the USA that can provide a starting point for the design, development, implementation and evaluation of early intervention programs in Australian schools and school systems. Evidence on the efficacy of dropout prevention programs (DPPs) and truancy prevention programs (TPPs) in the USA suggest that the development and implementation of targeted early intervention programs is worth considering in Australia. DPPs aim to improve attendance and reduce dropout. TPPs aim to improve attendance.

The global literature review outlined six studies that examined the effects of DPPs on disengagement, primarily dropout, absenteeism and attendance.⁴⁴ Their collective investigations about the efficacy of interventions with at-risk students in the USA showed that:

1. DPPs can successfully reduce dropout and improve attendance⁴⁵
2. TPPs that are run within (as opposed to outside of) the school show more promise for reducing truancy⁴⁶
3. DPPs and TPPs that were well delivered (i.e. all components of the program were delivered and in the way they were intended) had better outcomes.⁴⁷

Further research studies suggested that using more DPPs, or DPPs that include more components, was likely to be more successful than using fewer DPPs or DPPs that contain fewer components.⁴⁸ DPPs that use at least four different strategies have the best outcomes on dropout and attendance rates.⁴⁹

4.2 Guidance for schools

The research studies identified how certain processes and strategies were effective when intervening with disengagement. School-based programs should:

- offer vocational and academic training programs for students, as alternative curriculum choices were highly effective in preventing disengagement⁵⁰
- include multifaceted approaches or strategies to address two or more of the following: academic performance, attendance, behaviour, study skills, or organisational components of the school structure⁵¹
- mentor students, involving positive role models who support the student at risk of disengagement with academic and social issues⁵²
- introduce programs that target both truancy and dropout, particularly focused on school attendance⁵³
- support students to feel successful at school by helping them to strengthen their main competencies; enhancing students' social confidence and trust, and providing a positive school environment and opportunities to bond with adults can prevent truancy⁵⁴
- provide programs tailored to the student (e.g. tiered) and delivered to small groups of similar students using the same or similar teachers over time to foster a sense of belonging and support ongoing monitoring⁵⁵
- include community-based programs appropriate for the individual student⁵⁶
- introduce respectful relationship programs focused on relationships between students and adults⁵⁷
- provide learning environments that are safe and include violence prevention plans and behavioural management⁵⁸
- build relationships with the families of students at risk.⁵⁹

4.3 Overview of interventions in case study schools

The focus of this paper is on the identification of students at risk of disengagement from school. However, the paper does provide the following snapshot of what interventions are used in the 10 case study schools to take action to support at-risk students.

Taking action with at-risk students involves:

- concerted work both within and beyond the school
- improved support for at-risk students and improved provision for all students
- access to specialist support staff and training and development for all school staff.

The case study schools implemented intervention strategies across three levels: community, school and student. These strategies have not been reviewed or evaluated for their efficacy.

Community level interventions

Community level interventions are designed to:

- target families and children prior to starting school through kinder transition programs
- develop ongoing transition processes
- provide mentorship programs with local business leaders to give students a sense of purpose and belonging in the community
- establish community programs to connect students within their community throughout, and or beyond, their school life.

Who? Principals are the primary drivers of community-based interventions. Principals of a number of case study schools described how they had embedded practices within the community in order to better support all young people throughout their educational journey. To illustrate this point, a case study Principal explained how he negotiated with local business leaders to support an adult mentorship program that provided his students with ‘a sense of purpose and sense of belonging in the community’.

“ ... we want to challenge the kids to be aspirational, challenge the families to be aspirational, challenge the agencies and also challenge the staff.

(Principal, P-9/12 School)

What? Schools develop collaborations with local businesses, feeder schools and pre-schools, families and other agencies in order to better support the life-long educational journeys of students. These include mentoring programs, kinder transition program, student success guarantee programs, and parenting and childcare programs.

“ Engagement comes from the connection with the kids and the parents; the community. Behind these programs are the kids’ interests: where am I going to be able to engage them in the first place? It’s really important to listen to the community and engage with the community.

(Principal, Primary School)



Case study examples

Three case study schools focused on being well 'anchored' in the community from the early years through to the time students were leaving school and transitioning into trades, employment or further educational opportunities.

1. One Assistant Principal described collaboration with the local council to offer refugee students free swimming lessons as an attempt to teach new skills and provide cultural experiences that broaden students' horizons.
2. A primary school Principal described working closely with the local kindergartens and preschools, with funding for an oral language program run by speech therapists. The strategies the school adopted were in cooperation with the local kindergartens and preschools to provide parent information about the pre-screening of students before they start at school. Early childhood educators were offered professional development to assist with the oral language screening program.
3. Another primary school Principal in a rural location, whilst not having a specific community-level program in place, spoke about the importance of understanding the needs and interests of the kids and the parents, and encouraging them to engage with the community.

School-level interventions: student focused and staff focused

School-level interventions are designed to work across the entire school to support all students at risk of disengagement (student focused) or build skills and capacity of all school staff (staff focused).

Specific school-level interventions, suggested by the case study schools, included:

- making curriculum and pedagogy more flexible to allow for individually targeted programs
- purposeful professional development for staff building the knowledge of staff about tools and processes for intervention
- initiating transition programs with schools to better support students at risk of disengagement during the transition periods where risk of disengagement increases
- creating alternative settings (school-based and external) for at-risk students
- coordinating regular team meetings between relevant staff to monitor interventions for students at risk.

Who? The school leadership team with members of staff, at various levels within the school, are the main drivers of intervention strategies at the school-level.

What? School-level interventions involve accessing high-quality professional development to skill all members of staff about intervention, and understanding and responding to the complex challenges affecting vulnerable students.

School-level interventions should be driven by the information provided by the school data, for example:

- if the data indicates attendance issues, the school may appoint an attendance officer
- if the data indicates behavioural issues, the school may implement a school-wide behaviour plan or professional development in behaviour management
- the data indicates academic progress issues, the school may introduce professional development in a new literacy initiative.

The case study schools implemented the following student-focused school-level interventions in response to the issues identified by their data:

- **academic progress:** the schools implemented school-level assessment and reporting strategies, pedagogy and curriculum content, and the structure of teaching groups
- **behaviour:** the schools implemented a school-wide positive behaviour support (SWPBS) framework. This Department-supported initiative provides professional development, mentoring and a common language for all levels within a school from Prep through to the senior years and is linked to the school values
- **wellbeing:** the schools appointed a wellbeing team, including a qualified, locally-based social worker to assist the school staff to plan school-level programs and intervention processes and initiatives to support the overall wellbeing of all students.

The case study schools implemented various staff-focused interventions related to professional development, professional conversations, professional support and professional practice as described in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: School-level capacity building interventions

Professional development (nine schools)	Professional conversations (eight schools)
<p>To build skills and knowledge amongst staff on how to support students</p> <p>“ We are doing a lot of the Berry Street [professional development courses] on picking your battles with kids, supporting them in the right way, making classrooms accessible for all students. But our step now needs to be around differentiating work and making outcomes achievable for all kids.</p> <p>(Assistant Principal)</p>	<p>To facilitate shared planning of actions to support academic performance</p> <p>“ We will sit with a maths team and we look at the data. We have guiding questions along with narratives around students about what the teacher observes is happening, why this student has moved and why this student hasn’t moved. We leave the meeting with the outcome of how we are going to help them.</p> <p>(Lead Teacher)</p>
Professional support (six schools)	Professional practice (five schools)
<p>To increase access to specialist support staff</p> <p>“ I’ve tripled the Wellbeing Team as well. They’re the people who are highly attuned, so trained social workers not just teachers, people who work in juvenile justice. [We also have a] clinical nurse because there are ways children present from a health perspective. And we have campus managers as well. We are basically just trying to tier that level of support for the teachers. They are our main line, our first port of call. The teachers are the ones who will notice that change in behaviour, that at risk behaviour. So, it’s levelled support and that’s been a huge change.</p> <p>(Principal)</p>	<p>To improve transition processes and practices</p> <p>“ ‘We have a transition program where the Wellbeing Officer and Prep teacher go into the Kinder and take observations. We get some data from the Kinders, but we are getting better at that.’</p> <p>(Assistant Principal)</p>



Case study examples

Case study schools used school social workers in different ways to support both individual at-risk students and school staff: 'The social worker sets up meetings for the student to work out a pathway for that student to get back into school, and meets with leaders in the school to discuss particular cases identified through the data'.

At three case study schools, the social workers discussed the value of having an open door policy:

'[When students arrive late to school] ... they come to my office. It's a soft entry point. They are at school at least and then they can wander off to class after recess or lunch or something. That gives me the opportunity to talk to them about what is going on with them.'

(Social Worker, P–9/12 School)

'I have an open-door policy ... it's a regular structure ... my door is open every break. I am projecting to students that ... I am someone you can come and see, a trusted person available for one-on-one conversations.'

(Social Worker, P–9/12 School)

'As a collective we would see they are falling behind in their work, for whatever reason, then they start to withdraw. They come and see me and say, "I don't know how to catch up", "I don't know where to catch up". It's the same with friends: "How do I fit in?" "Where do I begin?". [...] For young people navigating those situations, it's really tough.'

(Social Worker, Secondary School)

Student-level interventions: student focused and staff focused

Student-level interventions involve working directly with selected students at-risk of disengagement (student focused) or building teachers' skills and capacity to work with specific students at risk (staff focused). Student-level interventions aim to cater more effectively for individual students' needs. The case study interviewees suggested several intervention processes, such as, student support groups meetings, 'student voice' meetings, and student self-referrals.

Who? Members of staff, at various levels within the school, are the main drivers of intervention strategies at the student level.

What? Student-level interventions are designed to provide specific support for at-risk students by catering for their individual needs as a proactive measure against disengagement, or by building staff capability to support individual needs.

Student-level interventions that are focused on students include:

- individual education plans (IEPs) tailored to learning or behaviour plans for an individual student. The need for an IEP is first identified through the enrolment or referral processes

- flexible learning centres to provide dual enrolments, for example, three days at the centre and two days back on campus for specific students who are not able to engage full-time in mainstream school at that time. Enrolment in these settings provide an open-door policy so students can transition back to school when they are ready.

Other student-level processes include: rewards and consequences; goal setting; extra-curricular activities; student support groups; and enabling relationships with a significant person.

A classroom teacher explained the benefit that an individualised education plan can have in supporting a student at risk:

We're worried about this [new] boy, so we have just a basic learning plan for him that explains strategies like help him get out his books, be careful with pairing, put him with another boy who is at a similar level.

(Teacher)

Student-level interventions that are focused on staff involve building individual teacher skills and capacity to work with specific at-risk students through:

- professional development (e.g. around how best to support specific students)
- professional conversations (e.g. to facilitate shared planning of support for at-risk students)
- professional support (e.g. specialist support staff such as speech pathologists, careers advisors or adolescent health nurses to assist and advise teaching staff on how to support specific at-risk students)
- professional practice (e.g. to improve the focus on wellbeing for specific students during transition between schools).



Case study examples

Three case study schools talked about individual education plans (IEPs) and the philosophy of fitting the program to fit the child.

- One school talked about putting individualised supports in place based on test results and conversations with an adult who knows that child.

'So, if we identify our students through the testing we have done and conversations with teacher or another individual who knows that child, then we can put individualised supports in place.'

(Assistant Principal, Primary School)

- Another case study school suggested building a diversity of strategies so that the children want to be at school every day.

'... building pedagogical strategies so that the children want to be at school every day and that they trust that the teachers will be there to support them.'

(Assistant Principal High School)

- And another case study school suggested establishing alternative settings within the school where students can be involved in alternative activities.






'Building the school front fence, helping the gardener. [...] working generally on tools, but also interacting with others who are experiencing similar things and developing life skills that they might not be getting at home.'

(Lead Teacher, High School)

Table 4.1: Overview of intervention strategies used in case study schools

Intervention strategies for students at risk of disengagement

Examples from 10 Victorian case study schools

Intervention levels	Intervention strategies
 Community-level	Develop partnerships with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • local businesses • community organisations • feeder schools/pre-schools • parents and families • other agencies • philanthropic foundations.
 School-level (student focus)	Engage specialist staff to assist with support for students (e.g. social workers) Initiate whole-school initiatives targeting an aspect of disengagement (e.g. behaviour, attendance) Introduce supportive school structures and processes (e.g. house system, transition program)
 School-level (staff focus)	Organise professional learning opportunities to build understanding of at-risk learners for all staff (e.g. trauma-informed practice, School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support) Engage specialist staff to build capacity in teachers (e.g. attendance officers, social workers) Conduct regular team meetings and informal conversations to discuss all at-risk students
 Student-level (student focus)	Design and implement individual or differentiated support strategies (e.g. literacy interventions, peer support) Provide alternative or skill building programs (e.g. flexible learning options) Provide student engagement initiatives (e.g. student leaders, talent shows)
 Student-level (staff focus)	Organise and access training for specific staff to work with at-risk learners and implement specific intervention processes (e.g. trauma-informed practice) Engage specialist staff to work with at-risk students (e.g. adolescent health nurse, careers advisors, speech pathologists)

This infographic provides a brief snapshot of selected intervention strategies from 10 Victorian case study schools. For more information about the context for this snapshot access the *Insights for Early Action Research* papers at www.bastow.vic.edu.au/learning-resources/publications

Case study school examples

Case study school 3 (secondary)

Interventions	Examples/processes
Community-level	Mentoring programs (e.g. Principal developing school connections with local business leaders; Bounce; Mentoring Program)
School-level (student focus)	Attendance Officer; Wellbeing Officer; Social worker; streamed classes; STAR Connect (Home group values program); SWPBS plan; student support services;
School-level (staff focus)	Sub-school leaders/team leaders; weekly and fortnightly team meetings; Universal Design for Learning Model Professional Development; Berry Street Education Model training (school-wide)
Student-level (student focus)	Homework Club; study hall; home visits (teacher with Wellbeing Leader for chronic non-attendance); student support meetings; IEPs; student support services; mentoring programs; SWPBS; Alternative programs
Student-level (staff focus)	Universal Design for Learning Model (learning intentions, success criteria, hook, scaffolding, consistency); Berry Street Education Model training (for individual teachers)
Key	IEPs – Individualised education plans STAR Connect – SWPBS – School-wide positive behaviour support

“ Since 2015 [the school] has moved from reactive to proactive, putting more resources into student wellbeing has made a huge difference ... when we have a teacher who has a great connection with the students ... we have success’.

(Principal)

Case study school 5 (P–12)

Interventions	Examples/processes
Community-level	The school is in partnership with the YMCA for the provision of childcare facilities and middle years outdoor education program.
School-level (student focus)	SWPBS plan; social worker; resilience, rights, and respectful relationships program (DET mandated); transition program
School-level (staff focus)	Strategic plan ('engaged at the point of need'); Positive climate for learning (plan and team); Wellbeing team; social worker; speech pathologist
Student-level (student focus)	IEPs; differentiated and structured teaching; supported study sessions; email support (after school hours); SPACE, FLIP (alternative learning options); referrals to the Wellbeing team; social worker (open-door policy)
Student-level (staff focus)	Berry Street Education Model training; access to specialists (social worker and speech pathologist)
Key	IEPs – Individualised education plans FLIP SPACE STAR Connect SWPBS – School-wide positive behaviour support

“ You have to be really committed to the moral imperative of education and that differs for people’s experience and understanding. There is no quick fix and no quick wins. It takes a long time and means investing money and resources.

(Principal)

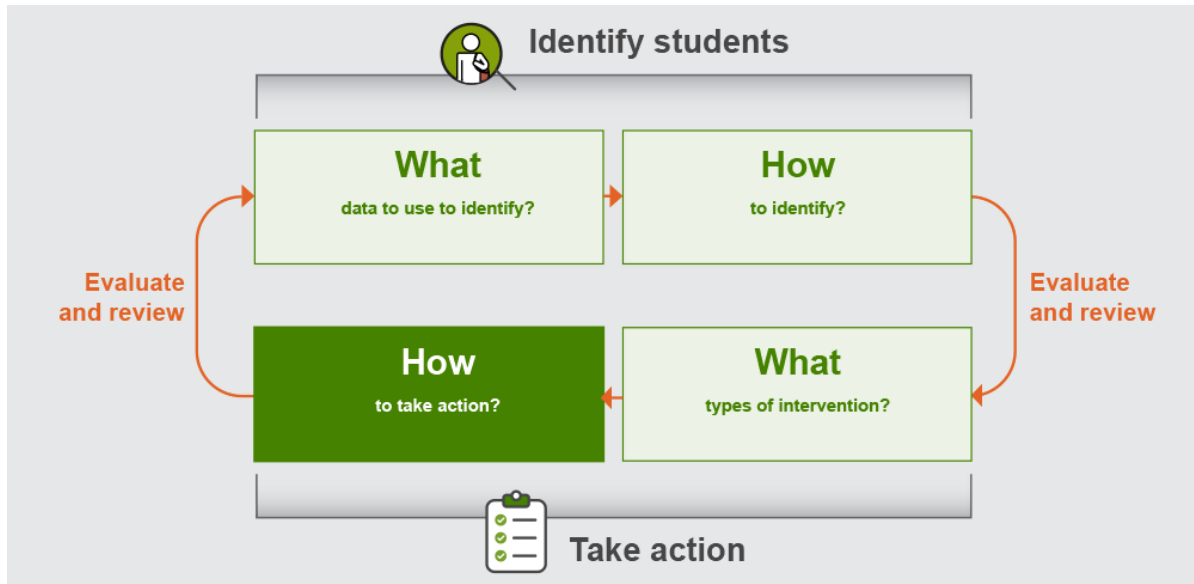
Case study school 7 (primary)

Interventions	Examples/processes
<i>Community-level</i>	Kitchen Garden program; Kinder transition
<i>School-level (student focus)</i>	Whole-school assessment tasks: PAT Maths and teacher-based tests, Fountas and Pinnell for reading, Single Word Spelling Tests (SWST) for spelling; building a culture of readers and writers: changed instructional model in Maths, new spelling model (SMART spelling); pedagogy, learning intentions and success criteria; SWPBS
<i>School-level (staff focus)</i>	(Small school) culture of professional conversations: 'informal conversations with staff, parents and students'
<i>Student-level (student focus)</i>	IEPs; relationships building: 'conversations with the students and finding out who the significant people in their life are'; check in (walk and talk); check out (reflection time); Junior School council (with Principal)
<i>Student-level (staff focus)</i>	Curriculum and pedagogical changes/expectations
<i>Key</i>	IEPs – Individualised education plans PAT Maths SMART spelling SWPBS – School-wide positive behaviour support

“ Things have really settled ... there has been a change in culture, change in expectations ... a consistent approach to behaviour management, and a focus on connection with staff and students, [the] personal approach, [and] relationship building’.

(Principal)

5 How can schools establish processes to take action?



The case study schools offer several insights on implementing a process to assist in 'taking action' (implementing interventions) for students at risk of disengagement.

5.1 Implementing a process for taking action

Case study interviewees provided the following guidance about 'taking action':

- be pro-active, rather than re-active
- sustain commitment over time and recognise that there are no easy solutions or quick fixes
- develop interventions that are both 'big-picture' and 'localised' and that support the 'life-long educational journey' of students
- focus on catering to individual student needs and build a deep understanding for the reasons why students have difficulties with learning, initiating supportive conversations with students and close analysis of student-level data
- build staff capacity to improve intervention processes in real-life contexts
- encourage sharing of information about students (e.g. at enrolment, during transitions and from external agencies) and about interventions (e.g. what interventions work and are evidence informed)
- monitor the implementation and effectiveness of interventions for students and create 'alerts' for negative changes in student attendance, unexplained absences and behaviour
- create strong connections with local organisations, agencies and networks that work with vulnerable families and at-risk young people
- revisit and reinvigorate emphasis on school culture and staff mindset in supporting and enabling interventions with at-risk students
- allocate sufficient school time and resources to provide support for students at risk of disengagement and those that are already disengaged.

5.2 Enabling conditions: checklist for schools

Case study interviewees were asked to explain what general enabling conditions (in addition to the specific guidance to establish intervention processes described above) existed in their school that assisted their process of intervention with at-risk students. Whilst there were a number of similarities with the enablers experienced during the identification and 'taking action' processes, there were also some additional enablers mentioned.



Supporting resource

Find a checklist of enabling conditions for the early identification of students at risk of disengagement and for intervention processes at Appendix B: Enablers for identification and intervention processes. The resource lists those enablers unique to identification and those unique to interventions and those applicable to both processes.

✓ Access to specialist support staff, school-based wellbeing teams or external agencies

Practices

- A wellbeing team or wellbeing officer such as a social worker can be helpful to assist teaching staff.

“ Having [the wellbeing officer] as a dedicated role [is critical]. He [or she] is available to go with someone [to visit the family], to follow up the non-attendance, along with the teacher talking about learning issues and the importance of learning and the wellbeing officer talking about the mental health issues and family support. [They are] doing more home visits and earlier.

(Social Worker)

Department of Education and Training Victoria resources
[Student Support Services](#)

✓ Primary to secondary school transition programs that enable communication between primary and secondary schools

Practices

- Implementing intervention strategies across primary and secondary schools that explicitly support at-risk students during the vulnerable time of transition and shared responsibilities for intervention between primary and secondary school staff

“ Transitioning is a big thing here. Our students are low in literacy and numeracy, they haven't felt safe in the past, connectedness and belonging is high on their list, and our list as well.

(Case study interviewee)

Department of Education and Training Victoria resources
[Student Transition and Resilience Training \(START\)](#)

✔ School staff who are able to understand and connect with at-risk students

Practices

- Well-trained school staff who are able to understand and connect with at-risk students and families

“**Connections between adults and students, and students with students, is a key theme: ‘... when we have a teacher who has a great connection with the students ... we have success’.** (Principal)

Department of Education and Training Victoria resources

[**FISO Priority: positive climate for learning**](#)

A number of other enabling conditions were mentioned by interviewees as being relevant to intervention processes. As these enablers were also mentioned in relation to identification processes in Section 3.3 they are not described in detail again. These enablers included:

- ✓ School leadership and culture that prioritises student inclusion and engagement: promote and cultivate a school-wide culture that prioritises the creation of a supportive, inclusive and engaging school environment for all students.
- ✓ Positive and interactive relationships with families and community members: encourage staff to build trusted relationships with family and community members that are proactive, positive and interactive, for example, actively engaging families in the design and implementation of intervention strategies, which may involve home visits and or invitations to attend family or student support meetings.
- ✓ High-quality professional development in related skills: for example, trauma-informed practice, data literacy, school wide positive behaviour support, for school staff to develop skills related to specific interventions for students with complex needs (e.g. trauma)

What next?

The distilling of the research and examples from case study schools has been presented to prompt your thinking in how you can identify students earlier to maximise their engagement in learning. The suggested interventions have been tried by the case study schools to address the issues they have identified in their school. Your selected interventions will most likely be different, although selected to meet the same outcome of engaging students in their learning.

The Department is committed to supporting you in deepening your understanding of the data used to identify students at risk of disengagement and, using the FISO improvement cycle, work through a process to translate this identification into actionable interventions you can monitor and refine over time.

- ✓ For school leaders who want to start such a process, review your data and have conversations with colleagues and school community to help you identify those students you want to focus on, and what might be the interventions you wish to prioritise and implement.
- ✓ For school leaders who want to review their current process, consider the level of shared understanding across your school about the types of indicators and data used to identify at-risk students, and any areas of capability building needed. Also, consider the level of understanding shared with those schools that you transition your students to, or receive students from, on at-risk students, and what you can do to develop stronger connections and intervene earlier for these students.

The resources and links included in this guide are not exhaustive but serve as an initial step to take in one or more areas of intervention. We hope this paper provides you evidence-informed insights for use as you translate data into actionable strategies to maximise student engagement, in particular those students more at risk of disengaging from their learning.

Appendix A: Global literature review and case study investigation methodology

Global literature review methodology

The scope of the literature summary was driven by the following series of search parameters:

- **overall focus:** empirical studies and research syntheses on the identification of students at risk of disengagement within schools and, in particular, on predictors of disengagement, the use of data and early interventions
- **time scale:** work published 2008–18
- **age range:** studies of practices with primary and secondary school-aged students
- **geographical scope:** work published in English in Australia, New Zealand, USA, Canada and the UK
- **publication types:** peer-reviewed journal articles, research and evaluation reports, and research-based guidance reports.

Based on these parameters, a comprehensive search using different keywords and four academic research databases was conducted and was restricted to the last 10 years (2008–18) and English language. In total, 5585 unique citations were identified using database searching and supplemental methods. Screening and selection criteria were used to quickly screen articles. After screening titles and abstracts, 167 studies remained for full-text review. After reviewing 167 full texts, 40 remained for inclusion in the final review. Publications were sorted into broad substantive categories using the three main literature review foci (i.e. predictors, use of data and early intervention).

Throughout this process, there was ongoing assessment of quality. This involved consideration of: the nature of the publication (e.g. peer reviewed article or grey literature); the nature of the study design (e.g. experimental or quasi-experimental or observational primary study, and systematic or narrative research review); the methodological characteristics of the study (e.g. the nature of the sample and sampling processes); and the nature of the research base (e.g. the number and range of studies undertaken on a specific topic). All of these processes were important in becoming clearer about the credibility of the findings of individual studies, the strength of the research base relating to different topics and the nature of the conclusions that could be drawn from different parts of the evidence base.

Case study investigation methodology

The purpose of the case study investigation was to explore how a sample of ten Victorian schools were identifying and intervening with students at risk of disengagement. The identification of potential case study schools started with recommendations of 15–20 possible schools by key informants (e.g. school reviewers, regional directors, current and former principals, researchers) within Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership, Evidence for Learning and Monash University. A sample of ten schools was then selected from this long list in order to ensure a mix of:

- school types: primary, secondary and cross-phase schools
- geographical locations: coverage of all Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) regions
- socio-economic contexts – varied Student Family Occupation and Education (SFOE) indices

After obtaining ethics approval from Monash University Human Research Ethics and DET, the research team approached the principals of the selected schools, inviting them to participate in the project.

A half-day visit was undertaken to each case study school in order to conduct semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with three or more members of staff (individually or in pairs). Overall, interviews (audio-recorded/handwritten notes) were conducted with 34 staff (current and former school leaders, middle leaders, teachers and support staff) in 10 schools (3 primary, 4 secondary, 3 P–9/12, and 1 specialist) across the all education regions of Victoria. The interview process placed a strong emphasis on using a series of exploratory questions about:

- how ‘students at risk of disengagement’ are defined
- the processes and practices used to identify such students
- the processes and practices involved in taking action with such students
- current enablers and barriers, and potential future improvements, in relation to identifying and taking action with ‘students at risk of disengagement’.

From the audio-recordings and handwritten notes, the researchers then developed a school-level summary of the key ideas, views and examples articulated by the staff in relation to each of the main research foci. The research team then conducted a thematic analysis as a cross-case comparison to explore similarities and differences of the definitions, practices, processes, enablers and barriers.

Appendix B: Enablers for identification and intervention processes

There are general conditions that support schools to establish effective processes for the early identification of students at risk of disengagement. These conditions are generally good practices in schools and were recommended by the case study interviewees as enablers or barriers to the implementation of early identification and intervention processes (in addition to the specific guidance to establish identification and intervention processes).

The following diagram is a summary of the enabling conditions described in the paper that relate to processes to identify students at risk of disengagement and processes to take action for students at risk of disengagement.



Appendix C: Case studies

Case study school 1: Summary of context, and identification and intervention practices

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This is a large school that emerged as a single entity with several campuses after an amalgamation in the last decade. Demographic changes in that time have impacted the school both positively ('new arrivals, higher aspiration families') and negatively ('students suffering trauma, family violence, drug and alcohol abuse'). There has also been a change in the poverty levels, with 78% of the school population now in the bottom ICSEA quartile. Many families are also highly mobile, transient families: 'So quite a shift in the population. If we could keep them here we could see some improvements. This is the bottom quartile we are talking about. We are not able to track the students who are leaving'. Key challenges faced by the school include 'upskilling the staff and constant changes in school population with outgoing and incoming families, particularly in the bottom quartile'.

Grade range	Enrolment	SFOE Index	SES BQ	Indigenous students	LBOTE students	Attendance rate
P-9/12	1965	High	78%	7%	30%	89%

IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
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Indicators

Attendance	✓	Compass: flags at 90% and 80%; Attendance Officer
Behaviour	✓	Compass; SWPBS plan; student wellbeing meetings; Team Around the Learner
Academic	✓	Compass; reporting cycle every six weeks
Family issues	✓	Enrolment form; staff observation; student wellbeing meetings; Team Around the Learner
Wellbeing	✓	Staff observations; student wellbeing meetings; Team Around the Learner
Engagement	✓	Staff observations
Aspirations		
Transitions		

Tools

SIMS	✓	Compass
Surveys	✓	Student Attitudes to School survey; early years survey
Bespoke spreadsheet	✓	Team Around the Learner Tier 3 data spreadsheet

INTERVENTIONS WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

Interventions	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
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Community level	✓	Linking philanthropic funding and community support with 'student success' guarantees; Skyline Education Foundation Australia mentoring program
School level (student focus)	✓	Team Around the Learner framework; 'staged response' process (explicit teaching of core values); Attendance Officer; SWPBS plan; team meetings (referral, IEP, wellbeing); staff induction process
School level (staff focus)	✓	School-wide 'staged response' process (understand student learning data; create inclusive environments and practices); embed practices into staff school induction
Student level (student focus)	✓	IEPs and differentiation ('that's their plan'); SWPBS; student support meetings; Social Workers; Chaplain
Student level (staff focus)	✓	Berry Street Education Model training; Foundation House training; school-wide 'staged response' process (understand student learning data; create inclusive environments and practices); embed practices into staff school induction

Key

ICSEA: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
 IEPs: Individualised education plans
 LBOTE: Language background other than English
 Sentral: Education management software

SES BQ: Socio-economic status bottom quartile
 SFOE: Student Family Occupation Education
 SWPBS: School-wide positive behaviour support

Case study school 2: Summary of context, and identification and intervention practices

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This school sits in an area that has had a socially economic upward shift over the last decade. The staff discussed the efforts made to change the physical environment, culture and public image of the school. To quote one interviewee: 'The promotion of the school has increased numbers and improved reputation through the new Principal's role in the school: creating relationships beyond the school, symbolic things like uniform ... reverted back to a more traditional curriculum to address the community wants'. Initially, the enrolments weren't coming from the traditional feeder schools, due to the school's past reputation, 'but that has changed over the last few years, we tripled our Year 7 intake this year'. Despite the successes, the Assistant Principal remarked, 'for our student body, there is a proportion where, if we start at home, there isn't a respect for education, there isn't that aspiration that comes from the parents through to the children. [There is] multi-generational unemployment, welfare dependency. They are nice kids ... but [they] just follow in mum and dad's footsteps. Identifying the disengagement is quite easy. What to do about it and how to address it is the difficulty'.

Grade range	Enrolment	SFOE Index	SES BQ	Indigenous students	LBOTE students	Attendance rate
7–12	378	Low–medium	23%	2%	46%	88%

IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
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Indicators

Attendance	✓	Compass: 90%, 80% flags; 3 days unexplained absence
Behaviour	✓	Compass: behaviour patterns; teacher observations
Academic	✓	Compass: lack of progress; wellbeing team
Family issues	✓	Compass; teacher observations (issues at home)
Wellbeing	✓	Teacher observations; wellbeing team
Engagement	✓	Teacher observations
Aspirations	✓	Teacher observations

Transitions

Tools

SIMS	✓	Compass
Surveys		
Bespoke spreadsheet	✓	Transition data compiled from the intake forms, then collated into a spreadsheet

INTERVENTIONS WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

Interventions	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
<i>Community level</i>	✓	Developing links with primary schools; making stronger connections within the community
<i>School level (student focus)</i>	✓	Transition program; SWPBS plan; STAR home group program (core values, connecting with others); Wellbeing Officer; Social Worker (referrals); Careers Advisor; student support team
<i>School level (staff focus)</i>	✓	School culture (team environment, holistic approach); Careers Advisor (supporting teacher); Social Worker (supporting teacher); learning design professional development
<i>Student level (student focus)</i>	✓	IEPs; academic support; SWPBS; peer mentoring program; buddies program; Social Worker (referrals); Adolescent Health Nurse; Chaplain
<i>Student level (staff focus)</i>	✓	Support through specialist staff: Careers Advisor; Social Worker; Adolescent Health Nurse; school chaplaincy; learning design

Key

ICSEA: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
IEPs: Individualised education plans
LBOTE: Language background other than English
Sentral: Education management software

SFOE: Student Family Occupation Education
SES BQ: Socio-economic status bottom quartile
STAR: Student Teams of Action and Reflection
SWPBS: School-wide positive behaviour support

Case study school 3: Summary of context, and identification and intervention practices

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This high school has grown from 760 to 1100 in the last few years and become more diverse with a threefold increase of students with a language background other than English (LBOTE). The increase in the refugee community has added to the already low SES profile, which is exacerbated by generational unemployment. The Principal has recently instigated new approaches to attendance and wellbeing, and the staff are in the early stages of developing identification and interventions for 'at risk' students. For example: 'Since 2015 we have moved from reactive to proactive, putting more resources into student wellbeing [and this] has made a huge difference'. The latest Student Attitudes to School survey triggered a response around 'connection to school'. This resulted in early interventions around developing connections and building respect and responsibility, particularly for attendance at school, with positive responses already evidenced. Adult-student and student-student connections are key: 'when we have a teacher who has a great connection with the students ... we have success'.

Grade range	Enrolment	SFOE Index	SES BQ	Indigenous students	LBOTE students	Attendance rate
7-12	1067	High	57%	3%	40%	90%

IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
Indicators		
Attendance	✓	Compass: triggers at 95% and 85%, 3 days unexplained absence; Attendance Officer
Behaviour	✓	Compass; SWPBS; teacher observations
Academic	✓	Compass; teacher reporting/observations
Family issues	✓	Enrolment and referral processes
Wellbeing	✓	Wellbeing Officer follow-up; teacher observations
Engagement	✓	Teacher observations
Aspirations		
Transitions		

Tools

SIMS	✓	Compass
Surveys	✓	Student Attitudes to School survey
Bespoke spreadsheet	✓	Spreadsheet developed to collect and analyse data for the mentoring program

INTERVENTIONS WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
<i>Community level</i>	✓	Mentoring programs (eg Principal developing school connections with local business leaders; Bounce)
<i>School level (student focus)</i>	✓	Attendance Officer; Wellbeing Officer; Social Worker; streamed classes; STAR Connect (Home Group values program); SWPBS plan; student support services
<i>School level (staff focus)</i>	✓	Sub-school leaders/team leaders; weekly and fortnightly team meetings; Universal Design for Learning Model professional development; Berry Street training
<i>Student level (student focus)</i>	✓	Homework club; study hall; home visits (teacher with wellbeing leader for chronic non-attendance); student support meetings; IEPs; student support services; mentoring programs; SWPBS; alternative programs
<i>Student level (staff focus)</i>	✓	Universal Design for Learning Model (learning intentions, success criteria, hook, scaffolding, consistency); Berry Street training

Key

ICSEA: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
IEPs: Individualised education plans
LBOTE: Language background other than English
Sentral: Education management software

SES BQ: Socio-economic status bottom quartile
SFOE: Student Family Occupation Education
STAR: Student Teams of Action and Reflection

Case study school 4: Summary of context, and identification and intervention practices

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This school sits in an area that has shifted 'from being quite a working-class community ... to a welfare-based community' due to the loss of industry. The demographic now consists of predominately 'welfare class, welfare dependant, unemployment, trauma, domestic violence and child abuse ... quite entrenched disadvantage'. The Principal described the community as having concentrated disadvantage; however, he believes the disadvantage is 'double in this school' due to more affluent families sending their children to schools in higher SES areas. He goes on to explain that his cohort includes many students whose parents work on the premise that 'you leave school at 16', so there is a challenge in 'breaking that barrier of finishing school and going on welfare or working at McDonald's'. In addressing the issue of disengagement within the community, the Principal explained that: 'You have to be really committed to the moral imperative of education and that differs for people's experience and understanding. There is no quick fix and no quick wins. It takes a long time and means investing money and resources'.

Grade range	Enrolment	SFOE Index	SES BQ	Indigenous students	LBOTE students	Attendance rate
7–12	551	High	56%	5%	5%	88%

IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
Indicators		
Attendance	✓	Compass: 'red flags' set at 90%, 80% and 50%
Behaviour	✓	Compass; staff observations; SWPBS Tier 1, 2, 3 behaviours
Academic	✓	Compass; standardised testing: PAT; Fountas and Pinnell, NAPLAN; teacher judgement
Family issues	✓	Enrolment process (eg low SES; generational unemployment, refugee status)
Wellbeing	✓	Enrolment process (eg trauma background); teacher observations
Engagement	✓	Teacher observations; wellbeing team referral process
Aspirations	✓	
Transitions	✓	Network with local feeder primary schools; tracking achievement data
Tools		
SIMS	✓	Compass (plus visual data board)
Surveys	✓	Student Attitudes to School survey; student wellbeing survey
Bespoke spreadsheet		

INTERVENTIONS WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

Interventions	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
<i>Community level</i>	✓	A community partnership program with a not-for-profit consultant firm, local feeder primary schools, the local community and philanthropists. The program involves tracking students from Year 4 to Year 9. It also involves building networks with philanthropists and the local community and funding and intervention programs
<i>School level (student focus)</i>	✓	Attendance Officers; Student Wellbeing Officer; SWPBS (tier level interventions); Year 7 transition program
<i>School level (staff focus)</i>	✓	Wellbeing leaders; professional development based on wellbeing data (specific issues); year level leaders; team meetings (weekly and fortnightly); Wellbeing Officer (teacher support)
<i>Student level (student focus)</i>	✓	Check-in/check-out protocols; Wellbeing Officer (self-referrals); QuickSmart; Hands on Learning, The House; Behaviour Card; IEPs; student support meetings; Project 9 (Impact Initiative)
<i>Student level (staff focus)</i>	✓	Professional development based on wellbeing data (specific issues)

Key

ICSEA: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage

IEPs: Individualised education plans

LBOTE: Language background other than English

PAT: Progressive Achievement Tests available from Australian Council for Educational Research

Sentral: Education management software

SES BQ: Socio-economic status bottom quartile

SFOE: Student Family Occupation Education

SWPBS: School-wide positive behaviour support

Case study school 5: Summary of context, and identification and intervention practices

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This college was established less than ten years ago in response to a population 'explosion' during the previous decade. The school cohort has a high level of students with a language background other than English. The three staff interviewed all commented on the importance of understanding family background and cultural issues, such as increased academic pressure in some families ('parents [have] high expectations for their children to get As and Bs') and a high level of transience in others ('Maori and Islander families often send their kids back to New Zealand or Samoa if they are getting too difficult'). They highlighted the Berry Street training as being 'essential for teachers to understand where the students are at, what at-risk behaviours to look out for and what strategies to use'. They also all shared the importance of the wellbeing team 'as a group of people that students and staff could approach if they have concerns and as a forum for meeting and discussing student outcomes (attendance, behaviour and academic) on a fortnightly basis'.

Grade range	Enrolment	SFOE Index	SES BQ	Indigenous students	LBOTE students	Attendance rate
P–9/12	1614	Low	14%	1%	55%	93%

IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
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Indicators

Attendance	✓	Compass; teacher observations
Behaviour	✓	Compass; teacher observations
Academic	✓	Compass; progress: pre- and post-tests, NAPLAN, Fountas and Pinnell; Essential Elements
Family issues	✓	Compass; enrolment data; family meetings
Wellbeing	✓	Teacher observations; referrals
Engagement	✓	Teacher observations
Aspirations		
Transitions		

Tools

SIMS	✓	Compass
Surveys	✓	Student Attitude to School survey; social emotional learning survey
Bespoke spreadsheet	✓	Spreadsheets using Google Drive and Docs

INTERVENTIONS WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

Interventions	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
<i>Community level</i>	✓	The school is in partnership with the YMCA for the provision of childcare facilities and middle years outdoor education program
<i>School level (student focus)</i>	✓	SWPBS plan; Social Worker; resilience, rights and respectful relationships program (DET mandated); transition program
<i>School level (staff focus)</i>	✓	Strategic plan ('engaged at the point of need'); Positive Climate for Learning (plan and team); wellbeing team; Social Worker; Speech Pathologist
<i>Student level (student focus)</i>	✓	IEPs; differentiated and structured teaching; supported study sessions; email support (after school hours); SPACE, FLIP (alternative learning options); referrals to the wellbeing team; Social Worker (open door policy)
<i>Student level (staff focus)</i>	✓	Berry Street training; access to specialists (Social Worker and Speech Pathologist)

Key

FLIP: Flexible Learning Intervention Pathway	SFOE: Student Family Occupation Education
ICSEA: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage	Sentral: Education management software
IEPs: Individualised education plans	SES BQ: Socio-economic status bottom quartile
LBOTE: Language background other than English	SWPBS: School-wide positive behaviour support

Case study school 6: Summary of context, and identification and intervention practices

SCHOOL CONTEXT

While classified as a medium SFOE indexed area, 46% families in this small primary school are in the bottom (ICSEA rated) SES quarter. Many of the families have experienced generational or long-term unemployment and are dependent on welfare payments. As one interviewee said: 'Lack of role modelling by parents is a big factor. We know that in our community that parents haven't finished high school. We have high expectations, but parents don't have high expectations'. The Principal also commented on an increase in 'deficit in oral language and experiences ... and ... in children being identified on the autism spectrum [over] the last 5–6 years'. In preventing disengagement, all the staff interviewed stressed that the most important element was the relationship with the families. The Principal explained, 'There might not be an attendance issue but we know that there are family issues so if that child misses one day that may be a flag straight up and we will make contact straight away. It's about knowing your school community and your students – I don't know how one would do it at a larger school'.

Grade range	Enrolment	SFOE Index	SES BQ	Indigenous students	LBOTE students	Attendance rate
P–6	148	Medium	46%	9%	3%	79%

IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

Reported by interviewees? Examples/processes

Indicators

Attendance	✓	Sentral: 'we monitor late attendance and absenteeism, from first day absent'
Behaviour	✓	Sentral; teachers observations
Academic	✓	Sentral: significantly below or above expected levels
Family issues	✓	Enrolment process; teachers observations
Wellbeing	✓	Teachers observations
Engagement	✓	Teachers observations
Aspirations	✓	Teachers observations
Transitions	✓	Linked to local early child education schools and high school

Tools

SIMS	✓	Sentral; data wall
Surveys	✓	Student Attitudes to School survey
Bespoke spreadsheet	✓	Online mark book (uploaded into Sentral regularly)

INTERVENTIONS WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

Interventions	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
<i>Community level</i>	✓	Working closely with the local kinder; for example, funding for an oral language program in kinder or preschool; parent information session run by Speech Therapists; professional development sessions for kinder staff and local childcare teachers with an oral language screening program; pre-screening students before they start at school
<i>School level (student focus)</i>	✓	School improvement team (SIT), assessment schedule (NAPLAN data, PAT testing, Essential Assessment); investing in human resources (eg Integration Aides); SWPBS; wellbeing team; transition program
<i>School level (staff focus)</i>	✓	Staff meetings; professional conversations (eg data wall, small school capabilities); professional development
<i>Student level (student focus)</i>	✓	Alternative activities at break times (eg reverse garbage, talent show, library activities); IEPs; reading recovery program; student leaders; interest groups (eg environment group); learning goals; differentiation; check-in/check-out process
<i>Student level (staff focus)</i>	✓	Parent-teacher communication (open door policy); educational support person; focus on curriculum improvement (reading)

Key

ICSEA: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage

IEPs: Individualised education plans

LBOTE: Language background other than English

PAT: Progressive Achievement Tests available from Australian Council for Educational Research

SES BQ: Socio-economic status bottom quartile

SFOE: Student Family Occupation Education

Sentral: Education management software

SWPBS: School-wide positive behaviour support

Case study school 7: Summary of context, and identification and intervention practices

SCHOOL CONTEXT

The cohort demographic of this small rural school was described by the Principal as very mixed: 'generational poverty, very vulnerable families and kids, who have come in recently due to the relatively cheap housing and facilities, or you have "tree changers" who have a good background of education and employment behind them. It's quite a melting pot'. Maintaining and growing the enrolment has been challenging. 'With three other schools within a 5-km radius, if the parents aren't happy then they leave'. Since his appointment four years ago, the Principal has focused on behaviour and family connections, along with changing culture within the school: 'Things have really settled ... there has been a change in culture, change in expectations'. The key elements to this change were a change in pedagogy, with a 'move away from a play-based curriculum', 'a consistent approach to behaviour management, and a focus on 'connection with staff and students, personal approach, relationship building'.

Grade range	Enrolment	SFOE Index	SES BQ	Indigenous students	LBOTE students	Attendance rate
P-6	51	High	40%	2%	4%	90%

IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
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Indicators

Attendance	✓	CASES21; teacher observations
Behaviour	✓	Teacher observations; staff conversations
Academic	✓	Assessment analysis – 'we want to see slow increases'
Family issues	✓	Teacher observations; staff conversations
Wellbeing	✓	Teacher observations; staff conversations
Engagement	✓	Teacher observations; staff conversations
Aspirations	✓	
Transitions	✓	Kinder transition process; teacher observations; staff conversations

Tools

SIMS	✓	Sentral (not currently installed – in process)
Surveys	✓	Student Attitudes to School survey; KidsMatter survey
Bespoke spreadsheet		

INTERVENTIONS WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

Interventions	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
Community level	✓	Kitchen garden program; kinder transition
School level (student focus)	✓	Whole-school assessment tasks: PAT maths and teacher-based tests, Fountas and Pinnell for reading, Single Word Spelling Tests (SWST) for spelling; building a culture of readers and writers: changed instructional model in maths, new spelling model (SMART spelling); pedagogy, learning intentions and success criteria; SWPBS
School level (staff focus)	✓	(Small school) culture of professional conversations: 'informal conversations with staff, parents and students'
Student level (student focus)	✓	IEPs; relationships building: 'conversations with the students and finding out who the significant people in their life are'; check-in (walk and talk); check-out (reflection time); junior school council (with Principal)
Student level (staff focus)	✓	Curriculum and pedagogical changes/expectations

Key

ICSEA: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
IEPs: Individualised education plans
LBOTE: Language background other than English
SFOE: Student Family Occupation Education

Sentral: Education management software
SES BQ: Socio-economic status bottom quartile
SFOE: Student Family Occupation Education
SWPBS: School-wide positive behaviour support

Case study school 8: Summary of context, and identification and intervention practices

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This is an urban specialist school providing intake and outreach programs for primary-aged students experiencing behavioural difficulties in government school settings. A small number of students are accepted into a two-term program twice a year, based on referrals from primary schools in the region. In describing the school's approach, the Principal explained, 'We are coming out of the 1980s integration model and moving towards inclusion. So, we are delivering both outreach and the intake interventions and we've redesigned the intake programs from an integration to an intervention model'. The first whole-school initiative the school implemented was the SWPBS program. This program was informed by the [Evidence for Learning toolkit](#) where the recommendation for behaviour programs was 'three to six months, and it's a targeted intervention, behaviour intervention'. During the program, the students continue to attend their regular classroom once or twice a week. At the end of the program, the student returns to the classroom full-time. Both the teacher and the student are supported throughout the process by the school's outreach program, and the school also provides extensive professional support. In addition, the outreach service places skilled special education teachers into mainstream schools to work as coaches in supporting mainstream teachers with understanding and making appropriate learning adjustments for students with challenging behaviours.

Grade range	Enrolment	SFOE Index	SES BQ	Indigenous students	LBOTE students	Attendance rate
1-6	Maximum of 36 intake and up to 112 in outreach	N/A	N/A	Varies	Varies	N/A

IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

Reported by interviewees? Examples/processes

Indicators

Attendance	✓	These students have already been referred from local primary schools as students exhibiting some of these indicators, usually those around behaviour. The Principal explained the process of identifying each student's particular needs as follows: 'The first piece of evidence is the referral form. It tells us a lot about school culture, as well providing data on their behaviour and social and emotional wellbeing. Assessment tools include the School Behaviour Rating Scale which is used at the start and the end of the intervention, and a social emotional learning assessment called the Social Skills Improvement System. We also do a Pragmatics Language profile, and the Strength and Difficulties questionnaire at the start and the end of the intervention in order to measure the efficacy of the intervention'.
Behaviour	✓	
Academic	✓	
Family issues	✓	
Wellbeing	✓	
Engagement	✓	
Aspirations	✓	
Transitions	✓	

Tools

SIMS	✓	Bespoke
Surveys		
Bespoke spreadsheet	✓	The Assistant Principal collects all data in bespoke spreadsheets and tracks how many of the referred students have an IEP, behaviour support plan, WISC, mental health plan and student support group. They also track assessments, attendance and Program for Students with Disabilities.

INTERVENTIONS WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

Interventions	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
Community level	✓	As a specialist school, the interventions are based around building the student's social emotional skills so that they can learn how to self-regulate their behaviour and develop appropriate social skills. To support the student's transition back into mainstream school, an outreach program provides support and training to teachers. As one interviewee explained: 'It's standing by the classroom teacher. That's what the outreach program does. You've got regular classroom teachers and outreach teachers working side by side [including] the opportunity for them to come in and observe a specialist setting'.
School level (student focus)	✓	
School level (staff focus)	✓	
Student level (student focus)	✓	
Student level (staff focus)	✓	
		Alongside the intake program, the school also offers teacher professional development, an outreach team, PLC meetings and ongoing collegial and student support.

Key

ICSEA: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
IEPs: Individualised education plans
LBOTE: Language background other than English
PLC: Professional learning communities
Sentral: Education management software

SES BQ: Socio-economic status bottom quartile
SFOE: Student Family Occupation Education
SWPBS: School-wide positive behaviour support
WISC: Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children

Case study school 9: Summary of context, and identification and intervention practices

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This P–12 rural school includes ungraded and integrated special education. The school is situated in an area that has experienced significant demographic changes over the last decade. Numbers in the area 'have been reducing due to an aging population and industry shutting down'. The Principal describes 'a demographic of people for whom life is a battle at times. They've had poor educational experiences themselves, they are low SES, their aspirations are low. So for some students, just to arrive at school is a major win for us'. She goes on to share the school vision within this context: 'Disengagement happens at many levels throughout our whole community and our aim for this school is to be a hub for the community and also to develop partnerships outside our school gate because we all deal with the same families'.

Grade range	Enrolment	SFOE Index	SES BQ	Indigenous students	LBOTE students	Attendance rate
P–9/12	749	High	54%	8%	4%	91%

IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
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Indicators

Attendance	✓	Compass; staff observations; wellbeing team meetings
Behaviour	✓	Compass; staff observations; wellbeing team meetings
Academic	✓	Compass; staff observations; wellbeing team meetings
Family issues	✓	Enrolment processes; staff observations; wellbeing team meetings
Wellbeing	✓	Staff observations; wellbeing team meetings
Engagement	✓	Staff observations; wellbeing team meetings
Aspirations	✓	Staff observations; wellbeing team meetings
Transitions	✓	Linked with early childhood education schools; between junior and senior campuses

Tools

SIMS	✓	Compass
Surveys	✓	Student Attitudes to School survey
Bespoke spreadsheet		

INTERVENTIONS WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

Interventions	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
Community level	✓	CASEA parenting program for identified families in primary school; the donation of a horse for the VET equine program; employing people from the local community (eg Social Worker)
School level (student focus)	✓	Attendance Officer and processes; class structures (to keep as few teachers as possible in contact with the students); literacy/numeracy programs (from equity funding due to CASES21 data); wellbeing team; transition program
School level (staff focus)	✓	Careers Advisor, Social Worker and School Nurse (supporting teachers); Professional Learning Communities training; wellbeing team; increased leadership team; team meetings; staffing as a strategy 'really need to put the right people in front of the kids'
Student level (student focus)	✓	IEPs; Careers Advisor, Social Worker and School Nurse (open door policy, referrals, supporting students); VET programs (including equine program); Flexible Learning Centre (dual enrolments, 3 days/2 days); student meetings (with Principal); year level meetings (students); early years reading program
Student level (staff focus)	✓	Pedagogy/instructional model: 'focuses teachers, and helps students know what to expect'

Key

CASEA: CAMHS and Schools Early Action
ICSEA: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
IEPs: Individualised education plans
LBOTE: Language background other than English

Sentral: Education management software
SES BQ: Socio-economic status bottom quartile
SWPBS: School-wide positive behaviour support
SFOE: Student Family Occupation Education

Case study school 10: Summary of context, and identification and intervention practices

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This high school located in rural Victoria is closely connected with the community and other schools in the region. The Principal is concerned about students in the region: 'We always have a number of students out there who have not been involved in mainstream education but there has never been an option for them'. He went on to emphasise that they are working on 'alternative options around students achieving success' so they can 'have an ensured pathway'. This school is also one of the few Victorian schools that offers an IYLP scholarship, a federally-supported program for Indigenous students to stay in school. The Principal stated: 'I believe the school has an obligation to fit the students' needs. [...] We worry about every student and we try and find a program to suit the needs of the student in front of us'. To achieve this, the Principal has created alternative school structures (for example the Year 10 structure) and drives a data focus with 'strong data collection around the students themselves, teacher observation, behaviour, interactions with parents, student meetings, academic reports and absences'.

Grade range	Enrolment	SFOE Index	SES BQ	Indigenous students	LBOTE students	Attendance rate
7–12	1310	High	25%	10%	5%	94%

IDENTIFICATION OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
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Indicators

Attendance	✓	Data collection (own SIMS system)
Behaviour	✓	Teacher observations and data collection
Academic	✓	Teacher observations and data collection
Family issues	✓	Teacher observations and data collection
Wellbeing	✓	Teacher observations and data collection
Engagement	✓	Teacher observations and data collection
Aspirations	✓	Teacher observations and data collection
Transitions		

Tools

SIMS	✓	Bespoke: 'We have our own SIMS program here which is a student management information system and we have all the information that we collect of the individual CASES in schools and we collect in a massive spreadsheet'
Bespoke spreadsheet	✓	Regional network of Principals collects and analyses shared data within 'a massive spreadsheet'

INTERVENTIONS WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

Interventions	Reported by interviewees?	Examples/processes
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<i>Community level</i>	✓	The Principals of schools in this rural area have formed a strong allegiance and have been collecting (into spreadsheets) a large amount of student data (most academic) over a long period of time. The Principal is also working with a philanthropic venture to deliver support for students in finding work or entry into TAFE programs.
<i>School level (student focus)</i>	✓	CARE system; house system (7–12); student wellbeing team; 'Doctors in School'; transition programs
<i>School level (staff focus)</i>	✓	Specialised middle years teaching and learning strategies
<i>Student level (student focus)</i>	✓	IEPs; team around the student, Flexible Learning Centres; English and maths skill building programs; literacy programs; CHOICE learning program; VCE, VCAL; VET; Koori program; Year 10 structure
<i>Student level (staff focus)</i>	✓	Team meetings; collecting the regular data

Key

ICSEA: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
IEPs: Individualised education plans
IYLP: Indigenous Youth Leadership Program
LBOTE: Language background other than English

Sentral: Education management software
SES BQ: Socio-economic status bottom quartile
SFOE: Student Family Occupation Education
SWPBS: School-wide positive behaviour support

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