Junior Secondary

Research and Evidence paper

Queensland
Government

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Education acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands, seas, skies and waterways from across Queensland.

We pay our respect to the Elders, past, present and emerging, for they hold the memories, traditions, the culture and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the state.

For more information, see our [Commitment Statement](#).

Landscape of Learning

The Landscape of Learning design uses oceans, rivers, land and ecology to represent the interconnected systems that combine to create the Queensland Department of Education and the complexity of the work that we do.

The design reflects the flow of the learner and the different ways in which we experience the education journey. The north bank represents the systems, steps and milestones within education, while the southern bank refers to the relationship between students and staff and knowledge sharing. From the bank, a tree emerges with roots that extend downwards representing the ancient wisdom and knowledge from elders, teachers and the land itself.

The ocean draws attention to the journey flowing out into the vast fields of tertiary education and beyond. Acknowledging the Torres Strait Islands and ocean peoples, five shapes represent the distinct language and cultural groups of the region.

The Landscape of Learning is a custom embodied design for the Queensland Department of Education, produced in collaboration through a co-design process with Iscariot Media (IM) in 2022.

Contents

List of abbreviations

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority	ACARA
Australian Council for Educational Research	ACER
Australian Education Research Organisation	AERO
Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership	AITSL
Association for Middle Level Education	AMLE
Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Leadership Profiles	APSP
Australian Professional Standards for Teachers	APST
Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation	CESE
Department of Education and Training	DET
Department of Education, Training and the Arts	DETA
Department of Education, Training and Employment	DETE
Department of Education	DoE
Education and Training Reforms for the Future	ETRF
High impact teaching strategies	HITS
Multi-tiered systems of support	MTSS
Professional Standards for Middle Leaders	Middle Leader Standards
National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy	NAPLAN
New South Wales	NSW
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	OECD
K–12 Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework	K–12 Framework
P–12 Curriculum Framework for Queensland State Schools	P–12 Curriculum Framework
Positive Behaviour for Learning	PBL
Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority	QCAA
Queensland Certificate of Education	QCE
Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement	QCIA
Queensland Engagement and Wellbeing	QEW
Queensland University of Technology	QUT
Queensland Studies Authority	QSA
Regional School Industry Partnership	RSIP
Student Engagement Core	SEC
Senior Education and Training	SET
Social-Emotional Wellbeing Survey	SEWB
School Improvement Hierarchy	SIH
School Improvement Tool	SIT
School Online Reporting Dashboard	SORD
School Opinion Survey	SOS
School and Region Reviews	SRR
Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics	STEM
United Nations Children's Fund	UNICEF
Vocational Education and Training	VET
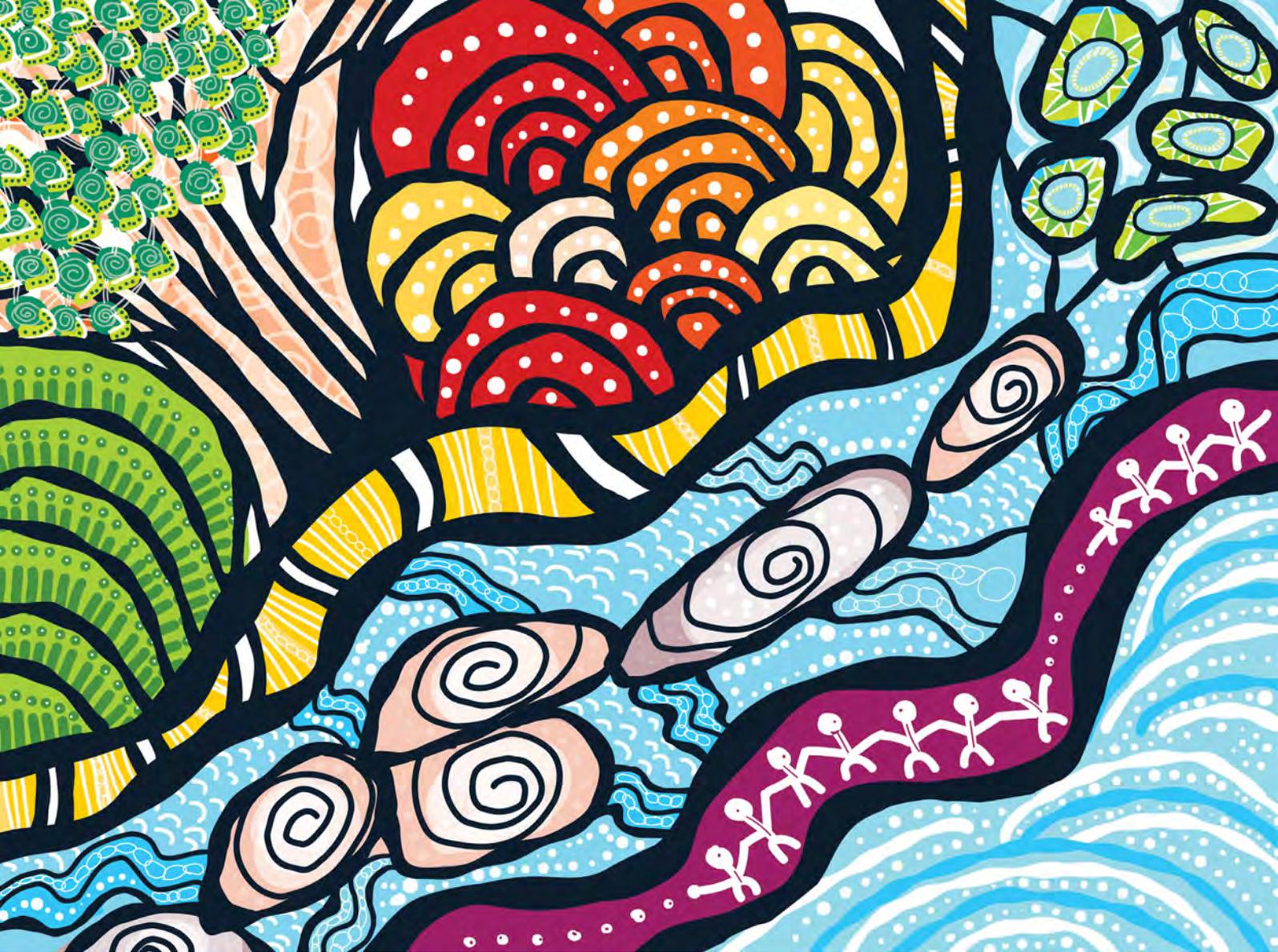
Executive summary

This paper summarises findings about contemporary adolescent learners, describes what engagement looks like, and outlines strategies for strengthening engagement which can improve student outcomes. It provides the stimulus to facilitate professional conversations across all layers of the system to reflect on current practices and processes. This will help to deliver on the department's Education Strategy priority of *On track for success* by identifying changes that could better meet the needs of Junior Secondary learners, including building awareness of programs that are effective at promoting engagement and re-engagement for targeted groups of students.

Research indicates that school leadership and teachers creating a culture of high expectations, implementing effective teaching and learning practices, and adopting a school-wide approach to improving Junior Secondary student outcomes can profoundly impact students' learning experiences and success. This is especially important for this unique group of learners.

Queensland's journey to date

In 2011, *A Flying Start for Queensland children (Flying Start)* identified middle schooling as an intentional approach to teaching and learning that would be responsive and appropriate for the full range of needs, interests and outcomes of Queensland Junior Secondary students. The movement of Year 7 into high school and the introduction of a Junior Secondary phase of schooling offered an opportunity to think differently about teaching and learning across Years 7 to 9 and to consider new ways of connecting with primary and upper secondary school parents and community members. Six guiding principles underpinned the initiative and provided a strong foundation upon which to develop appropriate strategies, processes and practices to bring about improved outcomes for students in early adolescence.

However, there is limited system-wide legacy of the processes and practices implemented through the *Flying Start* initiative. Therefore, it is time for a reinterrogation of:

▸ the *Flying Start* legacy in individual schools

▸ a system-wide approach to Junior Secondary

▸ processes and practices that best support contemporary Junior Secondary learners to realise their potential

▸ the resources and capability building required to support schools to implement an intentional approach to Junior Secondary and related transitions.

Emerging research

In the decade since *Flying Start*, understandings of the adolescent learner in the fields of psychology, education and neuroscience have progressed, providing a better understanding of young adolescent learners and how they learn. Because the context within which they are learning today is different, the system's approach to supporting these learners needs to adapt and evolve with the changing needs of these learners.

The shaping of brain wiring systems during early childhood is well documented. Advances in neuroscience have identified a 'second window of opportunity' during adolescence when the brain undergoes a second rapid phase of change as experience and environment combine with genetics to shape the brain. This crucially important window of opportunity influences the development of adolescents' brains, and subsequently their futures (UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti 2017). It is the responsibility of educators to support and provide experiences for students to build neural pathways and behavioural patterns that will set them up for success.

This is a pivotal time in which to influence students' identity, future behaviour patterns, self-regulation and self-awareness before the window closes. If adolescents experience positive learning experiences supported by parents, trusted adults, schools and communities during this window, there can be a shift away from negative risk-taking and towards healthy exploration and learning (UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti 2017).

Research funded by the Department of Education is currently underway and is investigating evidence of an adolescent dip in social, emotional and cognitive skills and dispositions, especially around the middle years and during the transition to high school. Research has also identified a distinction between attendance at school and being engaged in the process of learning (University of Queensland unpublished). Teachers play a crucial role in creating a supportive and positive social environment that fosters peer connections and the development of skills (Ramsay et al 2020).

'All young adolescents deserve educational experiences and schools that address their physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and psychological developmental characteristics in culturally sustaining and affirming ways' (Brinegar and Caskey 2022).

Lester (2013) emphasises three dimensions of student engagement – behavioural, emotional and cognitive – and Nayir (2015) highlights the relationship between students' engagement level and their attitudes toward school. More recently, student engagement has been reimagined as a continuum of learning behaviours. This could provide a shared language and understanding for system-wide responses attending to student engagement (Berry 2022).

Successful education in the middle years requires an 'intentional approach to teaching and learning that is responsive and appropriate to the full range of needs, interests and achievements of young adolescents' (Adolescent Success 2019). This success is achieved when four interconnected concepts are considered:

Adolescents	Educators	Places	Pedagogy
are changing intellectually, physically, emotionally, socially and ethically.	in the middle years are dedicated, knowledgeable, empathetic, passionate and relational.	of learning in the middle years are flexible, diverse, democratic, positive, safe and engaging.	used in the middle years is informed, inclusive, relevant, pastoral, global, innovative, challenging, integrative and responsible.

Similarly, the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) USA affirms that young adolescents deserve an education that is responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging. These attributes can be unpacked into characteristics of successful middle schools and classrooms.

Junior Secondary: *On track for success*

Together, the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration,* the department's Education Strategy, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) professional standards and the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) School Improvement Tool (SIT) provide the authorising environment for school improvement. This includes the core business of strengthening Junior Secondary learner engagement and improving their outcomes.

A whole of system sustainable response to transforming Junior Secondary will:

▸ align to the strategic vision laid out in the department's Education Strategy through the design and implementation of an evidence-informed approach to Junior Secondary engagement that prioritises educational achievement, wellbeing and engagement, and culture and inclusion (the priorities)

▸ build upon the successes of *A Flying Start for Queensland children*

▸ provide strategies to build the professional capabilities required to support the learning and engagement of all contemporary Junior Secondary learners

▸ create the conditions for innovation and for reimagining how the Junior Secondary phase of schooling is implemented in Queensland through a bold and responsive approach.

The findings unpacked in this paper affirm that the system is implementing a range of effective student engagement initiatives. However, there is scope for further development of intentional, evidence-based approaches and practices to Junior Secondary engagement.

Affirmations and opportunities for Junior Secondary: *On track for success*

Queensland Department of Education system-wide practices and ways of working that are affirmed by the research include:

- supporting school improvement through evidence-based policy, strategies and resources to inform local decision making
- using the nine domains of the SIT as a framework to support school improvement
- valuing the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* and the *Leadership Profiles* (APSP), the *Professional Standards for Middle Leaders* (Middle Leader Standards) and the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (APST) as frameworks for improving practice
- using an inquiry approach to reflect on current practice, identify where action is required and monitor improvement
- building principal, middle leader and teacher capability through diverse modes that respond to local contexts
- sharing examples of effective practice through diverse modes to facilitate scalability.

Some of the opportunities identified include:

- enacting Queensland State Schools Junior Secondary priorities in response to system data
- representing student voices in system responses
- supporting a systematic and effective transition from upper primary into and through Junior Secondary
- supporting the wellbeing of teachers as they respond to the social, emotional and academic needs of Junior Secondary learners
- reimagining system commitment to the:
  › engagement of contemporary adolescent learners
  › empowerment of school leaders and teachers to respond effectively.

There is scope for further development of intentional approaches and practices, including:

- facilitating system-wide professional conversations to co-design an evidence-informed conceptual framework that identifies areas for attention and action when responding to the needs of contemporary Junior Secondary learners
- providing a model and resources to support schools to conceptualise, plan and implement an improvement journey into and through Junior Secondary
- strengthening and developing evidence-informed processes and practices that provide intentional support for Junior Secondary learners
- capturing student voices to inform the development of engagement and learning strategies
- clarifying the position of Year 10 in state schools while balancing flexible approaches to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum that meet the needs of students, and maintain whole of system equity and accountability
- reinvigorating teacher capability, knowledge and understanding of:
  › the relationship between the behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions of student engagement
  › developmental characteristics of Junior Secondary learners
  › innovative strategies, effective practice and high-impact approaches that foster and support Junior Secondary learner engagement, motivation and resilience.

Junior Secondary in the Queensland context

'Education changes lives. We have a real opportunity to make a difference … Education is a truly equalising force — sometimes the best chance for vulnerable children to emerge into adulthood with positive choices and opportunities for their future.'

Queensland Government (Department of Education) 2022a, p14

1.1 Junior Secondary: *On track for success*

Through the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Education Services Australia 2019), the state of Queensland is committed to:

▸ equity and excellence in education, that is, all children and young people are confident, creative lifelong learners active in their community

▸ working to ensure that schools are responsive to students' developmental and learning needs in the middle years, in ways that are challenging, engaging and rewarding.

Queensland's Education Strategy, (Queensland Government (Department of Education) 2022a), sets a clear vision for a progressive, high-performing education system and provides a road map for all areas of the department to work together. It focuses on empowering teachers and school leaders, investing in digital innovation, strengthening school performance and support, fostering collaboration between schools and community, and delivering sustainable investment in schools for the future.

This research and evidence paper shines a spotlight on the Junior Secondary: *On track for success* phase of a student's learning journey.

'Evidence tells us that maintaining engagement in learning in Junior Secondary is crucial to keeping students at school and moving onto their senior schooling years.'

Queensland Government (Department of Education) 2022b, p2

1.2 Junior Secondary data trends

Effective planning, reviewing, monitoring and reporting in all Queensland state schools helps achieve the shared vision of every student realising their potential. Schools use data to make positive, evidence-informed decisions around student learning, wellbeing and engagement and to support school improvement.

2023 Junior Secondary engagement system data sourced from the School Online Reporting Dashboard (SORD), the School Opinion Survey (SOS) (Queensland Government (Department of Education) 2024c) and the Queensland Engagement and Wellbeing (QEW) Survey (State of Queensland (Department of Education) 2024d) shows a:

▶ marked increase in the number of suspensions

▶ decrease in attendance as students transition from primary school into Junior Secondary, and from Junior Secondary to Senior Secondary

▶ decrease in student agreement about:
  › their interest in schoolwork
  › being able to talk to their teachers about their concerns
  › teacher interest in their wellbeing
  › feeling safe at school
  › having their opinions being taken seriously
  › the management of student behaviour at school.

Queensland state school student engagement trends will be explored in detail in the relevant sections of this paper; however, the trends present a case for change. There is a need for a system response to ensure our Junior Secondary learners are engaged in their learning, attending school, and have a positive and optimistic view of themselves and their school.

1.3 The authorising environment for school improvement

> 'The ultimate goal of school improvement is to improve outcomes for students, including levels of achievement, engagement, and wellbeing.'
>
> ACER 2023, p1

The department's approach to school improvement and capability is anchored in the SIT and the AITSL professional standards.

The SIT 'describes the practices of highly effective schools and school leaders … [and] assists schools to review and reflect on their strategies to improve the quality of classroom teaching and learning. It supports school-wide conversations … about aspects of current practice, areas for improvement, and evidence that progress is being made' (ACER 2023, p1). The characteristics of effective practice are described across nine interrelated domains. The department has developed the School Improvement Hierarchy (SIH) (see Figure 1), which uses the nine domains of the ACER SIT to provide a framework and language for school improvement across Queensland state schools (Queensland Government (Department of Education) 2023e).

The School and Region Reviews (SRR) branch monitors and supports school performance and improvement through the administration of school reviews, an important part of each school's planning and improvement cycle. The review process is informed by the SIT and the SIH, supporting schools to reflect on current practice and prioritise areas of focus.

The school review process provides evidence of our success as a system at enacting the school improvement agenda. Every Queensland state school and centre undergoes a review at least once every four years to ensure they are delivering a quality education to students. All reviews consider a school's performance against the nine domains of the SIT and findings are analysed for emerging trends and areas requiring greater focus, and play an important role in how the department supports school improvement.
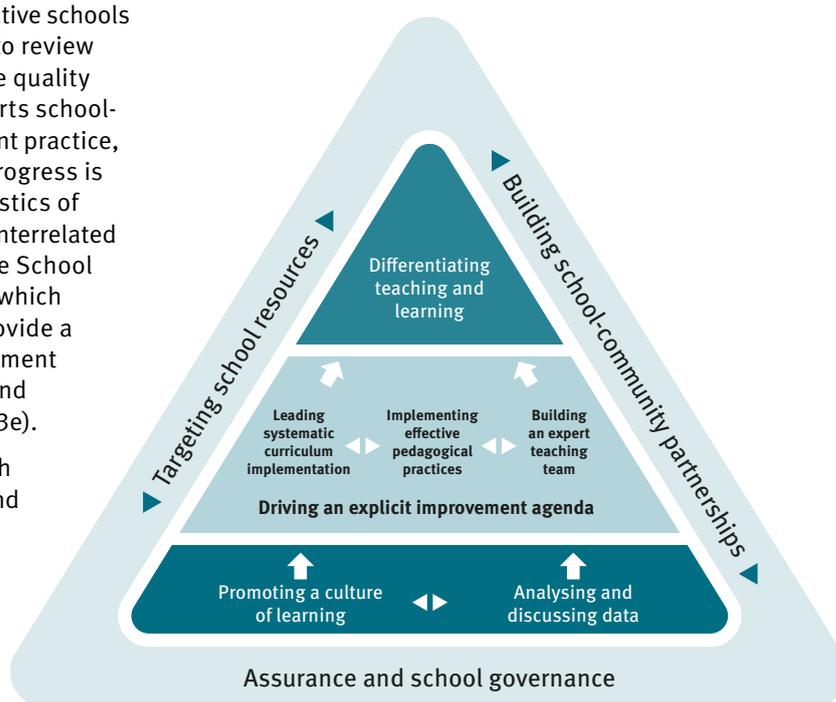
Figure 1: School Improvement Hierarchy[1]

The *School Improvement Tool Elaborations: Student engagement and wellbeing* (ACER and Queensland Department of Education 2022) were developed in partnership with the Queensland Department of Education (the department) as a resource to complement the SIT. They dive deeper into the international evidence about good engagement and wellbeing practice. The elaborations define the characteristics of practices that support student engagement and wellbeing across the nine domains of the tool. They provide an evidence-based framework for schools to review their current practices, identify new approaches and refine existing strategies to support the engagement and wellbeing needs of their students. By drawing explicit links between supporting student engagement and wellbeing and school improvement more broadly, schools can optimise their support for student engagement and wellbeing in a way that is targeted and forms part of a coherent school improvement agenda.

The following AITSL[2] publications state that principals, middle leaders and teachers have a shared responsibility for school improvement.

The APSP describe 'what school principals are expected to know, understand and do to succeed in their work' by developing and supporting teaching 'that maximises impact on student learning' and to ensure their leadership has positive impact (AITSL 2019, p3).

The Middle Leader Standards 'assist the development of ... middle leaders' knowledge, skills and dispositions' to support 'teachers to improve learning and wellbeing' (AITSL 2024, p5).

The APST describe what constitutes teacher quality, defining the work of teachers and establishing 'the elements of high-quality, effective teaching in 21st century schools that will improve educational outcomes for students' (AITSL 2022a, p3).

Together, the department's Education Strategy, the SIT, the SIH and the Australian professional standards provide schools with an authorising environment and a mechanism for driving school improvement and, consequently, student outcomes.

1.4 *A Flying Start* for Queensland children

The *Flying Start* initiative built upon the education reforms from 2001 to 2010 (see Figure 2) with the goal of realising the Queensland Government's priority for a world-class education system.

2001
Quality assurance of non-state schools with establishment of Non-State Schools Accreditation Board

2002
Education and Training Reforms for the Future (ETRF)

Queensland Studies Authority established

2003
Prep Year trial

2004
Prep Year trial extended

2005
Queensland Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Framework introduced

School reporting and annual Year 12 Outcomes reports introduced

2006
Queensland College of Teachers established

ETRF 'earning or learning' laws for senior students commence

2007
Prep Year commences with half cohort

2008
First full cohort of Prep students

First national literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN) tests

First Queensland Certificates of Education awarded

2009
Masters review report

Queensland publishes school NAPLAN results

Government announces universal kindergarten

2010
Queensland Education Leadership Institute to be established

Trial of teacher pre-registration tests to be held

Eight new kindergartens to open

Figure 2: Queensland education reforms 2001–2013[3]

An objective of the initiative was to improve transitions from primary to secondary school and support adolescent development. The Green Paper acknowledged that 'adolescence is a time of great physical, psychological and social change. Children and young people learn best when they are in age-appropriate settings. They need to be engaged and challenged by their learning experiences' (Queensland Government (Department of Education and Training) [DET] 2010a, p15). Students' experiences during high school contributes to their 'future and prepares them well for their development as young adults' (DET 2010a, p16).

> 'Young people in early adolescence are a distinct group with individual needs ... the introduction of Junior Secondary for Years 7, 8 and 9 will ensure the bridge between primary and secondary school is safe, strong and consistent for all students' and ... will focus on age-appropriate education, and support for students' wellbeing and transition.'
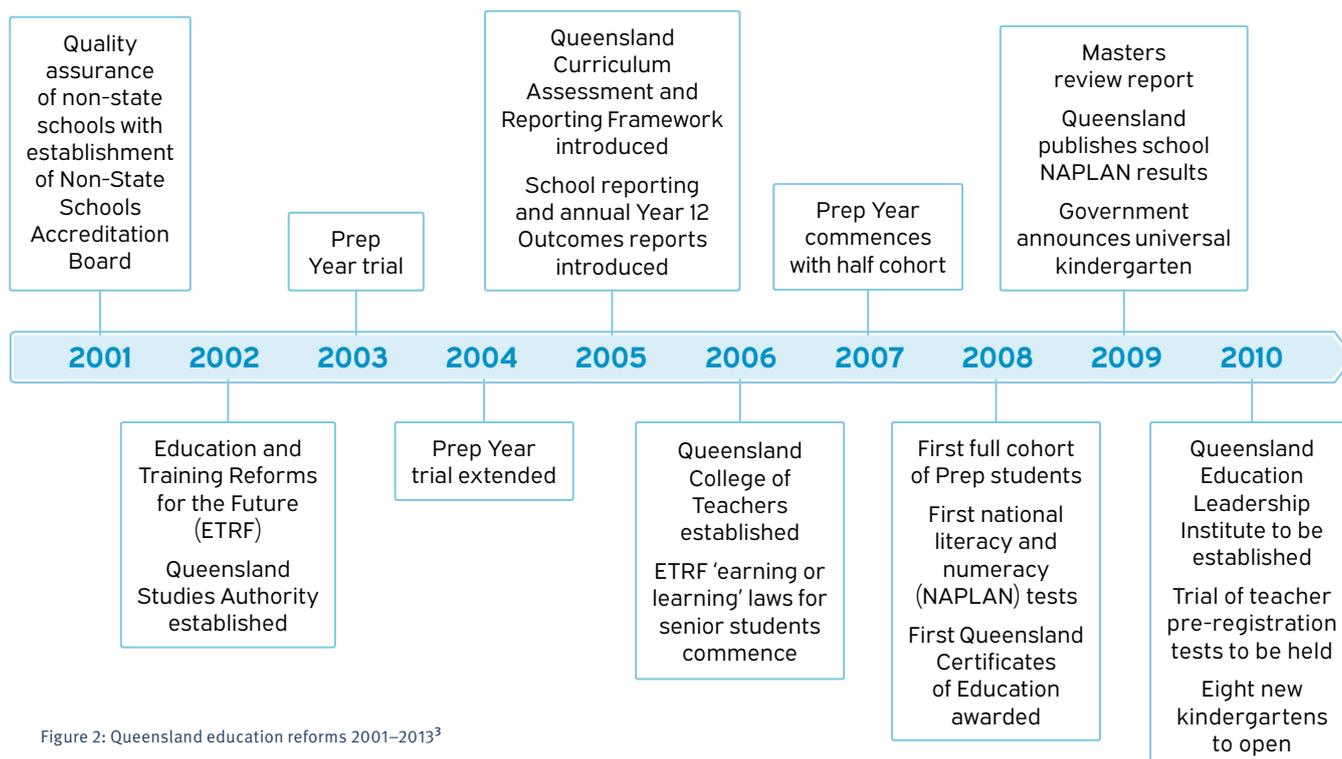>
> DET 2010b, p10–11

The subsequent White Paper, *A Flying Start for Queensland children* (DET 2010b), described key reforms that sought to ensure that Queensland children were better prepared for school, supported in the transition between primary and secondary school, and would benefit from high-quality schools and standards irrespective of the Queensland school they attend.

During this transitional phase, most young people enter puberty and face more rapid physiological and psychological change than in any other phase of life. Along with many positive developments, there is a greater risk of students becoming disengaged from learning, demonstrating variable achievement and exhibiting challenging behaviours. Middle schooling was identified as an intentional approach to teaching and learning that is responsive and appropriate for the full range of needs, interests and achievements of middle years students. Consequently, from 2013, state high, P–10 and P–12 schools began the implementation of a learning phase known as Junior Secondary.

The introduction of a Junior Secondary phase of schooling offered an opportunity to think differently about learning and teaching in the middle years and to consider new ways of connecting with primary and upper secondary schools, parents and community members.

Six guiding principles underpinned the *Flying Start* initiative and provided a strong foundation upon which to develop appropriate strategies, processes and practices to effect improved outcomes for students in early adolescence (DET 2010b).

1. **Distinct identity:** Junior Secondary students will be encouraged and supported to develop their own group identity within the wider high school. This can involve dedicated school areas and events.

2. **Quality teaching:** Teachers working with students in the Junior Secondary years will be given the skills they need through additional professional development, so they can support young teens through these crucial early high school years.

3. **Student wellbeing:** We will meet the social and emotional needs of Junior Secondary students with a strong focus on pastoral care.

4. **Parent and community involvement:** We want parents to stay connected with their child's learning when they enter high school.

5. **Leadership:** Schools will be encouraged to create leadership roles for students in Years 7, 8 and 9. Dedicated teachers experienced with teaching young adolescents will lead Junior Secondary supported by the principal and administration team.

6. **Local decision making:** The needs of each school community will influence how Junior Secondary is implemented in each school.

Twenty state high schools were selected to pilot Year 7 into high school ahead of the statewide move. Pilot schools provided advice about how to prepare and support students as they moved from primary to secondary school to ensure continuous learning and smooth transitions. A review of the pilot schools was conducted in 2014; the main learnings gathered from principals, teachers, students and parents were categorised into four key insights[4] (State of Queensland (Department of Education, Training and Employment) [DETE] 2014):

Insight 1

Focus on transition

Successful transition into high school involves a combination of key events over an extended period of time with various groups participating.

Consider:

› students transitioning from Year 6 into Year 7; Year 7 into Year 8

› parents

› affiliate schools

› existing and new teachers and teacher aides

› school management and administration.

Insight 2

Invest in your people

The move of Year 7 into high school during *Flying Start* created opportunities for some schools to expand their teaching workforce and to reinvigorate teaching practice.

Transitioning teachers provide new skills and experiences which add to your current staff makeup.

Invest in and value the diverse skill set of your staff.

Insight 3

Understand the adolescent learner

Understanding of the adolescent learner needs to be reflected in the approach to teaching, learning and assessment, and student wellbeing across the Junior Secondary years.

Get buy-in to your Junior Secondary philosophy and clarify roles, teaching models and approaches.

Focus on student wellbeing and student leadership.

Establish leadership opportunities for staff.

Insight 4

Seek regular feedback

Continuous improvement requires seeking out and acting on feedback.

Seek feedback from all groups and use that feedback to improve your Junior Secondary model or your approach to early high school education.

The following resources were developed to support schools to prepare for and action the introduction of Junior Secondary into high schools.

▸ **Junior Secondary Planning and Reflection Tool:** assisted schools to prepare for the introduction of Junior Secondary from 2013 by benchmarking the quality of existing programs and identifying strengths and priorities for future action.

▸ **Junior Secondary State School Statement of Expectations:** outlined each region and school's planning for the full implementation of Junior Secondary. It detailed the key priorities, planning and milestones in response to the six principles.

▸ **Junior Secondary Transition Tool:** facilitated smoother transitions from primary to secondary school through benchmarking the quality of existing programs and identifying strengths and priorities for future action.

▸ **Readiness Reflection Tool:** aligned the Statement of Expectations, ACER research and examples from various schools.

What does this mean for Junior Secondary: *On track for success*?

Together, the *Flying Start* guiding principles, insights from pilot schools and contemporary Junior Secondary learner research affirm the good work already underway in many state schools. It is time for a reinterrogation of:

▸ the *Flying Start* legacy in individual schools

▸ a system-wide approach to Junior Secondary

▸ processes and practices that best support contemporary Junior Secondary learners to realise their potential

▸ the resources and capability building required to support schools to implement an intentional approach to Junior Secondary and related transitions.

Definitions that build a shared understanding

The following terms and phrases have a specific meaning in the context of this paper.

Junior Secondary learner/s: Students in Years 7, 8 and 9 in Queensland schools.	**Young adolescents/adolescence**: Young people in the transition from childhood to adulthood, not exclusively in Years 7 to 9.	**Parents/caregivers**: Person/s who have, or exercise, parental responsibility for a student. In the context of supporting learners this could include family members who are not legal guardians.

Background: Queensland Department of Education surveys

School Opinion Survey (SOS)

The SOS (Queensland Government (Department of Education) 2024c) is used to obtain opinions about state schools from parents/caregivers, students and school staff. The survey is designed to help schools identify strengths and find areas that may need improvement within the context of the individual school. Selected SOS results should be included in school improvement planning, reviewing and reporting processes and can also be used in a range of other ways, such as:

▸ to provide a snapshot of the thinking of groups within a school community about aspects of the school

▸ to inform the school and its community, and to provide a focus for evaluation and reflection

▸ in discussion about the school's progress and for making judgements with respect to areas for development

▸ as part of the internal monitoring processes undertaken in the school, especially regarding any particular initiatives the school may have undertaken

▸ to track respondent opinions over time.

When considering the SOS responses presented in this paper, the following should be noted.

▸ The SOS data contain three distinct time series (from 2021, 2012–2019 and 1998–2012); however, only data from 2015 onwards has been included, as this was when Year 7 became the first year of high school in Queensland as part of the *Flying Start* initiative.

▸ From 2021, the SOS targeted all students in Years 5, 6, 8 and 11 at each school, with an option to supplement with students from Years 4, 7, 9 or 10 at small schools as required.

▸ Before 2021, 60 students from Years 5, 6, 8 and 11 were sampled at each school and supplemented with students from Years 4, 7, 9 or 10 at small schools as required.

▸ 'Agreement' presents the aggregation of the positive responses 'Somewhat Agree', 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree'.

▸ State report data aggregates responses from all regions, all school types and all year levels. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 disruption, the SOS was not conducted. This provided an opportunity for review, which resulted in a more streamlined survey.

▸ The 2021 review of methodology and data items resulted in a time series break for all SOS surveys. Comparison of 2021 results to previous SOS years should take this into consideration.

▸ When interpreting the data, it is important to take a variety of factors into consideration, such as the local context, the influence of social media users expressing opinions about education, greater societal views on education, and current national and state education policy.

Queensland Engagement and Wellbeing (QEW) Survey

The annual QEW Survey (State of Queensland (Department of Education) 2024d) collects information from Queensland state schools to gain a better understanding of the engagement and wellbeing of state school students. It asks questions across 12 domains: resilience, school climate, sense of belonging, motivation and perseverance, academic self-concept, personal social capabilities, general life satisfaction, future outlook and aspirations, relationships with peers, with teachers and at home, and general health.

The survey results are intended to inform continuous improvement within schools and provide an evidence-based approach to positively and proactively supporting students' mental health, school engagement and wellbeing.

When considering QEW Survey responses presented in this paper, it should be noted school participation in the survey is voluntary. Upon volunteering, principals in consultation with the school community determine which year level/s will complete the survey. Parents and students have the opportunity to opt out of participating.

1   Queensland Government (Department of Education) (2023e) *Supporting school performance and improvement*, Queensland Government, https://schoolreviews.education.qld.gov.au/about-us.

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3   Queensland Government (Department of Education and Training) (2010a) *A flying start for Queensland children: Education Green Paper for public consultation*, Queensland Government, https://cabinet.qld.gov.au/documents/2010/feb/flying%20start%20for%20children%20discussion%20paper/Attachments/discussion%20paper%20flying%20start.pdf, p4–5.

4   State of Queensland (Department of Education, Training and Employment) (2014) *Year 7 Pilot Schools – insights guide for principals*.

The contemporary Junior Secondary learner

'Young adolescents experience more rapid and dramatic hormonal and structural changes than at any other period in their life … Changes to brain and cognitive development peak during this period … This affects their learning ability and success in managing the emotional, social and moral challenges of this stage.'

Adolescent Success 2019

2.1 The need to know the contemporary Junior Secondary learner is anchored in the SIT and the AITSL standards
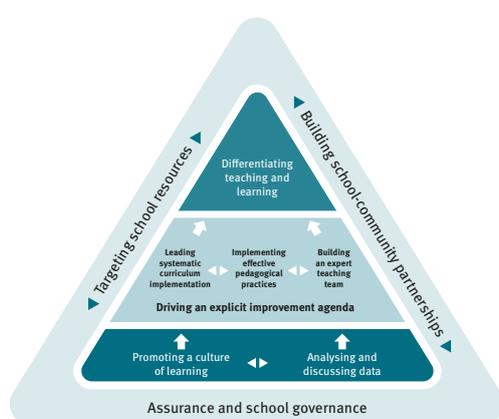
The SIT describes the actions of school leaders and teachers focused on knowing the Junior Secondary learner. These actions include:

▸ **analysing and discussing data** including a 'broad range of systematically collected quality data on student learning, engagement, and wellbeing outcomes' (ACER 2023, p4)

▸ **promoting a culture of learning** that demonstrates 'an understanding of the importance of positive, caring, and trusting relationships to student success' (ACER 2023, p6)

▸ **building an expert teaching team** that is working to 'develop deep understandings of how students learn' (ACER 2023, p10)

▸ **differentiating teaching and learning** by designing 'learning experiences that reflect students' learning needs, levels of readiness, interests, aspirations, and motivations to ensure that all students are appropriately engaged, challenged, and extended' (ACER 2023, p14).

The AITSL standards describe how knowing the Junior Secondary learner is a shared responsibility among principals, middle leaders and teachers, who are tasked with:

▸ **leading teaching and learning:** 'principals have a current knowledge and understanding of research into teaching, learning and child development and how to apply such research to the needs of the students in the school' (AITSL 2019, p21)

▸ **coordinating high-impact teaching and learning:** middle leaders 'prioritise the … application of insights from cognitive science and other research on how students learn, to optimise systematic deep learning' (AITSL 2024, p21)

▸ **knowing students and how they learn:** teachers 'demonstrate knowledge and understanding of physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students and how these may affect learning' (AITSL 2022a, p10).

2.2 Literature scan: Characteristics of the contemporary adolescent learner

Contemporary Junior Secondary learners are Generation Alpha

Individuals born from 2010 to 2024 are labelled as Generation Alpha; they are the 'children of the Millennials, and often the younger siblings of Generation Z' (McCrindle and Fell 2020). They are the first generation born entirely in the 21st century with all aspects of their life having been 'dominated by technology' (Ziatdinov and Cilliers 2021). The iPad was launched and Instagram was created in 2010, so they have 'been raised as screenagers' (McCrindle and Fell 2020). Drugas (2022) identifies that technology has been used as pacifier, entertainer and educational aid from Generation Alpha's early childhood; as a result, Generation Alpha are creative and curious but can be more impatient and less aware of others' needs compared to Generation Z.

This generation will navigate a diverse job market and are more likely to pursue multiple careers and continuous education. Consequently, they must become lifelong learners, mastering a new array of skills beyond traditional literacy and numeracy. Essential competencies for Generation Alpha include 'transferrable skills, the ability to relate well to people, resolve conflict, show leadership, communicate effectively, develop character formation, resilience, decision-making, care for others, and cultural awareness' (Fell 2023).

'Energetic, innovative, creative, curious and sometimes confused. Adolescents are going through changes that can be challenging for them … Understanding … insights into adolescent development may help … adults support adolescents to thrive.'

Wright 2018 p1

McCrindle and Fell (2020) describe Generation Alpha as:

- more culturally diverse than previous generations
- the most technologically, and, consequently, globally connected generation to date
- starting adolescence earlier, but extending later
- staying in education for longer and commencing their earning years later
- defined by technological devices, such as 'smartphones and tablets, video games, driverless trains, autonomous cars and smart speakers that speak back to you … [these have been] developed within their generation and it is all they have ever known' (p8)
- coming of age 'in unprecedented times of change and rapid technological advancement' (p8) resulting in higher social awareness.

Humphry et al. (2023) confirm that 'young people's lives are thoroughly intertwined with their digital use' (p21). The range of social media platforms and online games most frequently used include video content platforms (YouTube, TikTok), social apps (Instagram), messaging apps (SnapChat, WhatsApp, Discord) and games (Roblox, Minecraft, Fortnite). Many young people sign up to these platforms during late primary school, both with and without parental consent. 'Parents tend to underestimate the extent/frequency with which young people use social media' (p28). The most common social media practices of young people include chatting and watching videos or content, and while online they can experience unwanted contact, cyberbullying and harassment.

'Technology, social networking tools and websites have changed the way young people build and maintain their social connections with others' (Bourgeois et al 2014, p3). Dopamine, the main chemical involved in addiction, is produced by the brain in response to beneficial behaviours, including human connections both in-person and via internet and social media interactions. Smartphone usage has increased the

risk of dopamine addiction with 'its bright colours, flashing lights and engaging alerts, [delivering] images to our visual cortex that are tough to resist', and the availability of social media content is endless. Effectively, social connection has become 'druggified' by social media (Goldman 2021).

Despite this digital connection young people are lonely; they feel left out and cut off from the world (headspace 2022). The influence of digital devices, offering constant dopamine-driven reinforcement, has the potential to undermine relationships and poses a challenge to the development of meaningful interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence among Generation Alpha (Reeves et al 2023). Consequently, the impact of technology and social media on adolescents must be considered when developing strategies to support them in their learning and engagement.

Generation Alpha learners

Generation Alpha are driven by the enduring human needs of acceptance, community and belonging. While expressed differently to other generations, these remain key for Generation Alpha and are important for leaders and organisations, including schools, parents and community groups, to remember as they lead them into adulthood (Generation Alpha 2024).

Yurtseven and Karadeniz (2020) describe Generation Alpha learners as:

▸ extroverted, demanding learners eager to ask questions during classroom discussions

▸ able to reason logically, draw inferences and think strategically

▸ inventive and technically proficient

▸ influenced by social media personalities and celebrities.

Generation Alpha has an increasing awareness of global challenges such as sustainability, health and social justice. For them, 'learning is about innovating, building skills, and engaging with the real world … They prioritize learning experiences that are meaningful and relevant, and they will increasingly be looking for symmetry between their worlds inside and outside of the classroom' (Hosid 2021). They tend to have shorter attention spans and a preference for high-speed browsing, short answers, immediate feedback and multitasking. This can be an obstacle in the development of critical thinking, which requires time, attention and a focus on details (Bonchiş 2022).

Implications for educating Generation Alpha

As emphasised by Zmuda et al. (2017), the challenge of engaging Generation Alpha lies in continuing to use 19th-century school structures when they are living in the 21st century. When designing teaching and learning experiences for Generation Alpha, educators should:

▸ **Focus on skills, not content:** Students need to 'learn how to think, not what to think, and that includes being metacognitive about their own actions and choices'.

▸ **Provide learning with flexibility and a greater purpose:** Students need opportunities to show what they know and are able to do in 'innovative and creative ways across multiple content areas and be able to share those creations socially with local and global virtual audiences'.

▸ **Plan for collaboration**: Students will need 'many opportunities to show the processes that they went through to do something unique or solve an authentic problem'.

▸ **Cultivate soft skills**: Students will need classroom experiences with soft skills such as dealing with their own behaviour and the behaviour of others, navigating physical interactions with others, self-regulation and goal setting.

McCrindle (2019) describes three E's for parents, teachers and other adults of influence to consider when supporting the personal growth and resilience of Generation Alpha:

1. **Engage:** To engage effectively with Generation Alpha 'we've got to connect with them and make sure we communicate in ways that speak their language'; what has worked with previous generations will be less effective with this generation.

2. **Equip:** While Generation Alpha are technologically knowledgeable, they need to develop the transferable 'people skills' that will enable them to work in collaborative environments.

3. **Entrust:** Provide opportunities for Generation Alpha to 'step up … let them take on the stretch challenge … not everything will work successfully the first time, but that's how we all grow'.

Physical structures can also play a part in learning. Wilson (2023) proposes three key classroom design solutions to meet the learning needs of Generation Alpha:

▸ **Connections to nature and outdoors:** There is a reduction in stress and improved concentration, impulse control, and self-discipline when there are visual connections to nature.

▸ **Focus on wellbeing and wellness:** This is achieved through flexible learning environments and intentional spaces that reduce the need for the traditional 'quiet' classroom.

▸ **Flexible learning environments:** Break-out spaces, individual and small group instruction areas, and collaborative zones together with classrooms create opportunities for social interactions, sharing, teamwork and focus.

What is clear is the system as a whole, needs to understand students as Generation Alpha learners, and needs to respond with the appropriate mindset and skillset to meet the needs of these diverse learners.

FIRST
WINDOW OF
OPPORTUNITY

SECOND
WINDOW OF
OPPORTUNITY

AGE

0–3 YEARS   4   5   6   7   8   9–14 YEARS   15   16
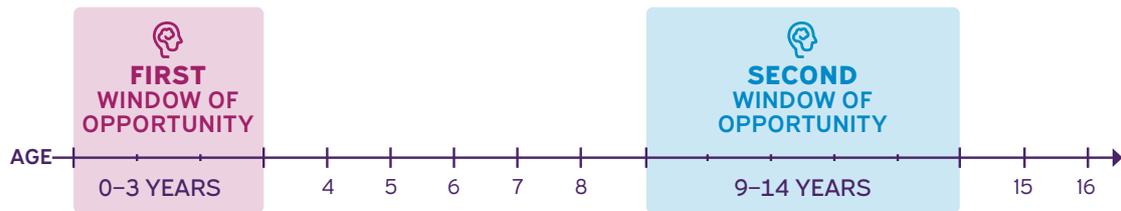
Figure 3: Based on A Teacher's Guide[5]

The adolescent brain: A 'second window of opportunity'

In the decade since *Flying Start*, understandings of the adolescent learner in the fields of psychology and neuroscience have progressed. Research emphasises the need for education systems to respond to the evidence of the changing needs of these learners and consider the implications for processes and practices.

The shaping of brain wiring systems during early childhood is well documented. 'In the earliest years of childhood, children's brains form neural connections at a rate never to be repeated. This is the first window of opportunity to influence the development of children's brains through nutrition, stimulation and protection from violence and other harms' (UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti 2017, p7) (see Figure 3). Advances in neuroscience have identified a second window of opportunity during adolescence when the brain undergoes a second rapid phase of change as experience and environment together combine with genetics to shape the brain. This crucially important window of opportunity influences the development of adolescents' brains, and subsequently their futures.

According to Giedd (2015, p33), the adolescent brain is not 'an old child brain or a half-baked adult brain; it is a unique entity characterized by changeability and an increase in networking among brain regions. The limbic system, which drives emotions, intensifies at puberty, but the prefrontal cortex, which controls impulses, does not mature until the 20s (see Figure 4). This mismatch makes teens prone to risk-taking but also allows them to adapt readily to their environment.'

The adolescent brain matures not by getting larger but through the increasing interconnection of brain components (see Figure 5), and it is the strengthening of these connections that forms the basis of learning. 'From ages 12 to 30, connections between certain brain regions or neuron groups become stronger … certain regions … become more widely connected'. These changes in brain connections assist 'the brain to specialise in everything from complex thinking to being socially adept' (Giedd 2015, p35).
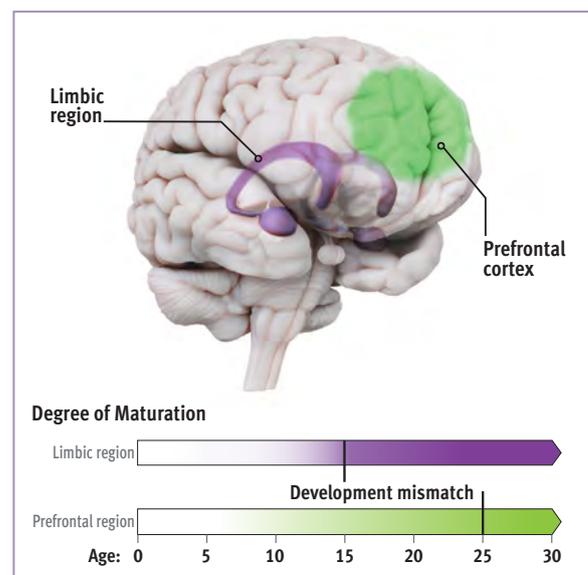
Figure 4: Degrees of maturation of the emotion versus control regions of the human brain[6]
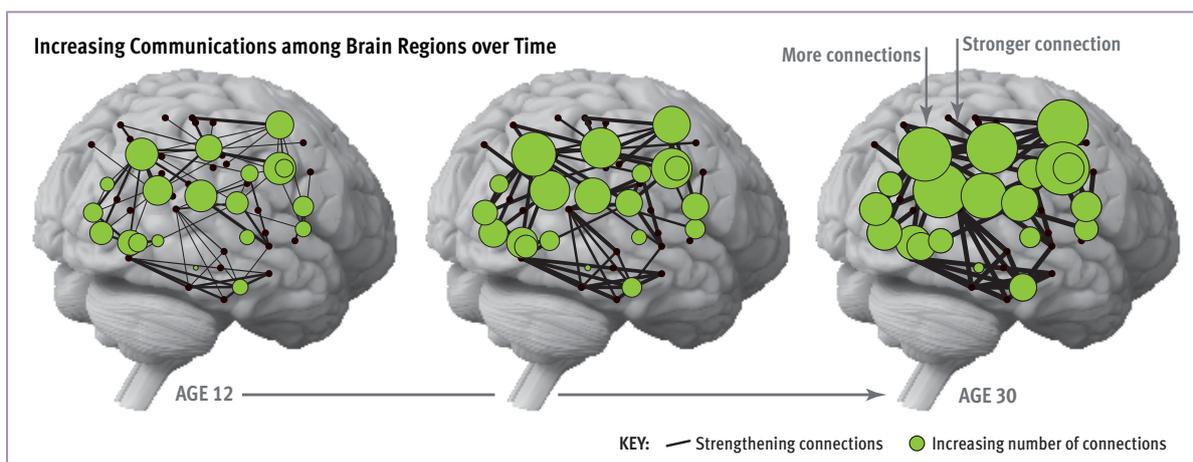
Figure 5 : Increasing communications among brain regions over time[7]

Daniel Siegel describes four key changes that adolescents experience: 'novelty seeking, social engagement, increased emotional intensity, and creative explorations. These changes affect how teens seek rewards in trying new things, connect with their peers in different ways, feel emotions more intensely and push back on the existing way of doing things to create new ways of being in the world' (Wright 2018, p1). The pre-frontal cortex is 'an area involved in important skills including emotion regulation, executive functioning, goal setting, problem solving, social awareness and decision making. These are all skills that are fundamental to learning, engagement, social connection, and overall wellbeing' (Learning Lab, University of Queensland n.d.).

Interacting biology and environment can result in both adolescent negative behavioural spirals; however, there are also opportunities for positive behaviour spirals (UNICEF and the World Health Organization 2021) (see Figure 6).

Positive behaviour spirals can occur if adolescents experience positive learning experiences 'during the period of brain development which occurs at the onset of puberty'. If the learning experiences are supported by 'parents, trusted adults, schools, and communities' then there can be a shift 'away from negative risk-taking … towards healthy exploration and learning – essential for acquiring skills and knowledge relevant to taking on new roles and responsibilities that lead

to adult capabilities' (UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti 2017, p23). Because the adolescent brain is extraordinarily sensitive to experiences it is extremely malleable or plastic, meaning it can be moulded and learn from experiences.

'During adolescence the brain is still being built, whole new brain circuits are being laid down and unused brain circuits are being eliminated, a process we refer to as pruning. Adolescence is the last time in development when those kinds of changes in the brain are still taking place … that makes it really important.'

Steinberg 2014

Consequently, it is essential for principals, middle leaders and teachers to understand the changing functionality of the developing adolescent brain. Because learning experiences directly affect a student's learning trajectory, the importance of the role schools play during the 'second window of opportunity' cannot be understated.

Commentaries that summarise adolescent neuroscience and what is known about positive and negative impacts on brain development can be accessed in *The Adolescent Brain: A second window of opportunity (A compendium)* (UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti 2017).
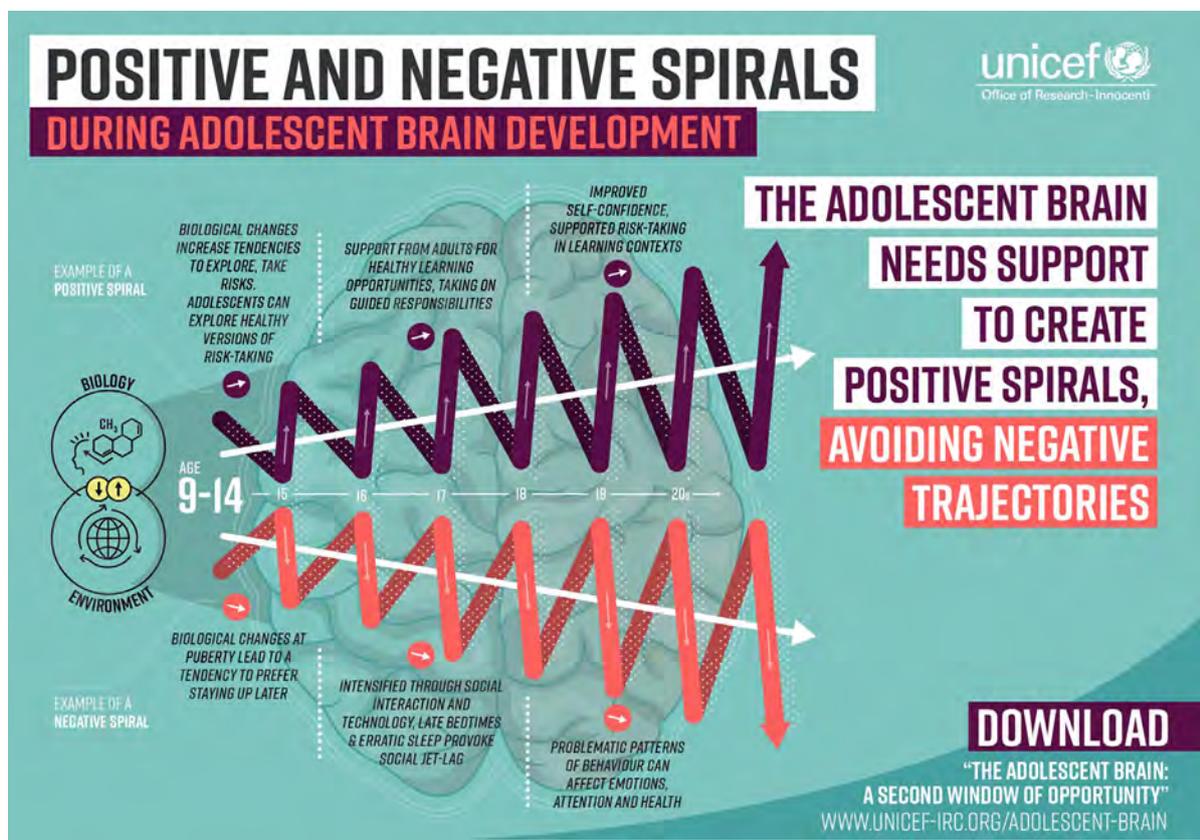
Figure 6: Positive and negative spirals during adolescent brain development[8]

Developmental characteristics of adolescent learners

The physical, intellectual/cognitive, emotional/psychological, moral/ethical and social characteristics of young adolescents are unpacked across the research field. These characteristics are interrelated and should not be considered discretely as this can 'oversimplify or describe young adolescents in generalities … that [do] not account for the role social identities such as race, culture, and gender identity play in identity development' (Brinegar and Caskey 2022). Brinegar and Caskey (2022) note that there is little research about the development of young adolescents' social identities.

Research currently underway by Bourgeios, Macmahon and Carroll (Learning Lab, University of Queensland n.d.) proposes an 'adolescent dip' – an apparent dip in adolescents' social, emotional and cognitive skills, and dispositions, 'particularly during the transition to high school around the middle years'. The investigation aims to understand more about the adolescent dip, when it occurs and its potential causes, based on diverse research that has identified such a dip in studies of academic wellbeing, learning and emotion regulation, engagement, self-esteem and more. The concept of an 'adolescent dip' appears to align with the experiences of adolescents, as well as the observations of parents/caregivers, educators and those who work with adolescents.

The research summary by Caskey and Anfara (2007) defines and unpacks discrete adolescent development characteristics and is summarised below.

Developmental characteristics of adolescents[9]

Physical

Physical development includes growth, improved gross and fine motor skills, and biological maturity. The body of adolescents undergoes more development than at any other time, except during the first two years of life. The onset of puberty is an intense developmental period and the highly visible changes associated with puberty cause many young adolescents to feel uncomfortable about differences in physical development.

Intellectual/cognitive

Intellectual development refers to the increasing ability of adolescents to understand and reason. While not as visible as physical development, it is just as intense.

During early adolescence, students:

› exhibit a wide range of individual intellectual development, metacognition and independent thinking

› tend to be curious and are eager to learn about topics they find interesting and useful

› prefer active over passive learning experiences and interactions with peers during learning activities

› are developing the capacity for abstract thought processes

› progress from concrete logical operations and problem solving to acquiring the ability to develop and test hypotheses, analyse and synthesise data, tackle complex concepts and think reflectively

› are increasingly able to consider ideological topics, argue a position, question adult authority and appreciate sophisticated levels of humour

› build upon their individual experiences and prior knowledge to make sense of the world around them

› are most interested in real-life experiences and authentic learning opportunities

› tend to be inquisitive about adults and are often keen observers of adult behaviour

› develop an improved ability to think about the future, anticipate needs and develop personal goals.

Moral/ethical

Moral/ethical development is associated with a growing ability to make principled choices. Adolescents tend to be idealistic and possess a strong sense of fairness in human relations. Their increased capacity for analytical thought, reflection and introspection shows connection between their moral and intellectual development.

Adolescents are beginning to:

› reconcile their understanding of people who care about them with their own egocentricity as they progress into the interpersonal conformity stage of moral development

› transition from a self-centred perspective to having consideration for the rights and feelings of others

› be aware of flaws in others, but are reticent to acknowledge their own

› pose broad, unanswerable questions about life and refuse to accept trivial responses from adults

› move from blanket acceptance of adult moral judgment to the development of their own personal values

› view moral issues in shades of grey rather than strictly in black and white

› consider complex moral and ethical questions, but are unprepared to manage them.

Emotional/psychological

Adolescents' emotional and psychological development is demonstrated through independence and identity formation. Their search for identity and self-discovery may exacerbate feelings of vulnerability as they become increasingly aware of the differences between self and others.

Adolescents can:
› be moody, restless and exhibit erratic and inconsistent behaviour including anxiety, bravado and fluctuations between superiority and inferiority
› be self-conscious, prone to lack self-esteem, and highly sensitive to criticism of their perceived personal shortcomings
› behave childishly, particularly in emotionally charged situations
› exaggerate simple occurrences
› vocalise naive opinions or one-sided arguments
› make decisions with negative consequences as a result of their emotional variability
› believe that their experiences, feelings and problems are unique.

Social

As adolescents develop socially, they are able to have more mature interactions with others. They have a strong need to belong to a group, and the need for peer approval becomes more important while the importance of adult approval decreases. Social maturity often develops after physical and intellectual development.

Adolescents:
› experiment with alternative behaviours
› can be rebellious to parents and adults, though still be dependent upon them
› test the limits of acceptable behaviour
› challenge adult authority
› overreact to social situations, ridicule others and feel embarrassment
› are socially vulnerable as a result of the influences of media and negative interactions with adults.

By responding to the emerging evidence and translating research into practice, education systems and schools can potentially minimise or avoid Junior Secondary students' experience of the adolescent dip. Likewise, recognising and understanding adolescent developmental characteristics and their relationship to curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices is necessary to ensure Junior Secondary learners are on track for success into and through Junior Secondary.

2.3 Building adolescent self-regulation

'In the context of learning, meta-cognition and self-regulation are essential abilities that enable students to learn in active, empowered, and adaptive ways to reach their learning goals. These abilities vary across students, and there is extensive evidence that students with better meta-cognitive ability experience improved educational outcomes.'

University of Queensland (unpublished), p1

For educators, arguably one of the most significant attributes to foster within adolescent learners is the ability to self-regulate. Murray and Rosanbalm (2017) define self-regulation as 'the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goals-directed actions' (p1). They argue that goal-directed actions are necessary for success in school, relationships and the workplace and that it is possible to teach self-regulation in adolescents due to changes in brain architecture. The brain systems of young adolescents that 'seek rewards and process emotions are more developed than cognitive control systems responsible for good decision-making and future planning. This means that self-regulation is developmentally "out of balance" at this age' (p1). Adolescents are still developing the following self-regulation skills:

▸ persisting on complex, long-term projects

▸ problem-solving to achieve goals

▸ delaying gratification to achieve goals

▸ self-monitoring and self-rewarding progress on goals

▸ guiding behaviour based on future goals and concern for others

▸ making decisions with broad perspective and compassion for self and others

▸ managing frustration and distress effectively

▸ seeking help when stress is unmanageable or the situation is dangerous.

Self-regulating learners are 'aware of their strengths and weaknesses and the strategies they use to learn … they can motivate themselves to engage in learning and develop strategies to enhance their learning and to improve' (Quigley et al. n.d., p8). As illustrated in Figure 7, for students to have success self-regulating their learning, they 'must:

1. develop an understanding of their abilities (*metacognitive knowledge*),

2. have a tool kit of strategies to help them manage their abilities to perform the task (*meta-cognitive skills*), and

3. be able to regulate their performance by:

▸ *planning how* they will complete a learning task,

▸ *monitoring* the success of the strategies they implement, and

▸ *evaluating* their success on the task as a result of the strategies they used (*meta-cognitive experience and control*)' (University of Queensland (unpublished), p2).

'Self-regulation develops and is learned through interaction with caregivers and the broader environment over an extended period from birth through young adulthood (and beyond). Cognitive, emotional, and behavioural self-regulation skills can be taught with structure, support, and coaching over time' (Murray and Rosanbalm 2017, p2). Parents and teachers, as caregivers, can intentionally support adolescents to develop the ability to self-regulate through the process of co-regulation. This can be achieved by:

▸ teaching self-regulation skills by modelling, providing opportunities for students to practice skills, and teaching them how, why and when to use their skills in different situations

▸ providing a warm, responsive learning space where students feel safe to learn and make mistakes; caring relationships and mentoring can also motivate students to develop and apply self-regulation skills

▸ structuring the learning environment to make student self-regulation manageable. This can include reducing opportunities for risk-taking behaviours, providing positive discipline, and decreasing the emotional intensity of conflict situations when they arise (Murray and Rosanbalm 2017).

Consequently, because self-regulation skills can be taught and learnt, schools and teachers have the opportunity to support the development of these skills in learners who are transitioning into and through Junior Secondary.
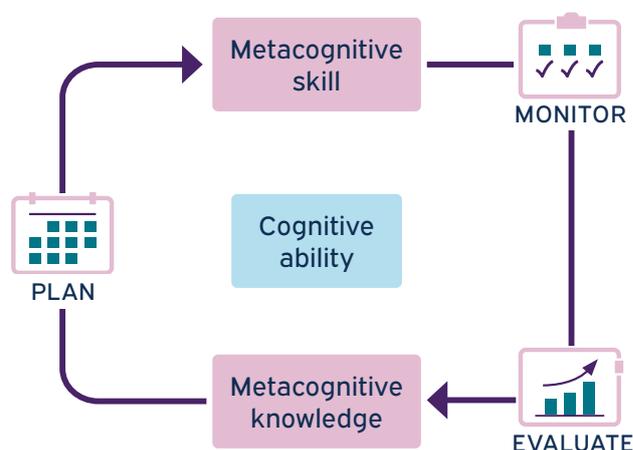
Figure 7: The sub-components of metacognition[10]

2.4 Adolescent wellbeing

Queensland Department of Education engagement and wellbeing data

As outlined in Part 1 Junior Secondary in the Queensland context, the QEW Survey collects information to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the engagement and wellbeing of state school students. When interpreting the insights from the 2021–2023 surveys (see Figure 8), it is important to be aware of the potential for response bias, as participation in the QEW Survey is voluntary.

Figure 8 shows a common pattern across twelve of the QEW constructs. Relative to all responses, Year 4 students, followed by Years 5 and 6, had the highest responses. Responses in Junior Secondary were slightly below the average for Year 7 students and lower for each higher year level of Junior Secondary – the lowest average response was from Year 9 students. A reverse pattern was observed through the Senior Secondary years – lowest in Year 10 and higher for each higher year level. This pattern aligns with the hypothesis underpinning the emerging concept of the adolescent dip: that is, adolescents experience a dip in social, emotional and cognitive skills, and dispositions.

Figure 8 has been organised by the strength of the relationship with year levels. Constructs on the top row see less variation between year levels in how students respond to the survey items, whereas constructs on the bottom row have the largest variation in responses.

'In education, wellbeing is important for two reasons. The first is the recognition that schooling should not just be about academic outcomes but that it is about the wellbeing of the "whole child" … The second is that students who have higher levels of wellbeing tend to have better cognitive outcomes at school.'

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2015b, p1

Adolescent wellbeing national data snapshot

The onset of mental health disorders tends to occur throughout adolescence and early adulthood (headspace 2018). 'Half of all mental health problems are apparent by age 14 with symptoms beginning in primary school' (Ramsay et al. 2020 p1).

Australian wellbeing data specifically for Junior Secondary learners is not readily available as national survey tools tend to collect data and information about young people ranging in age from 12 to 25. However, the data snapshots and findings outlined below highlight the concerns, feelings and pressures that young people bring with them to school before they enter a classroom to learn. The snapshots can also inform the development of strategies for communicating with parents, who are partners with schools, in the education of adolescent learners.
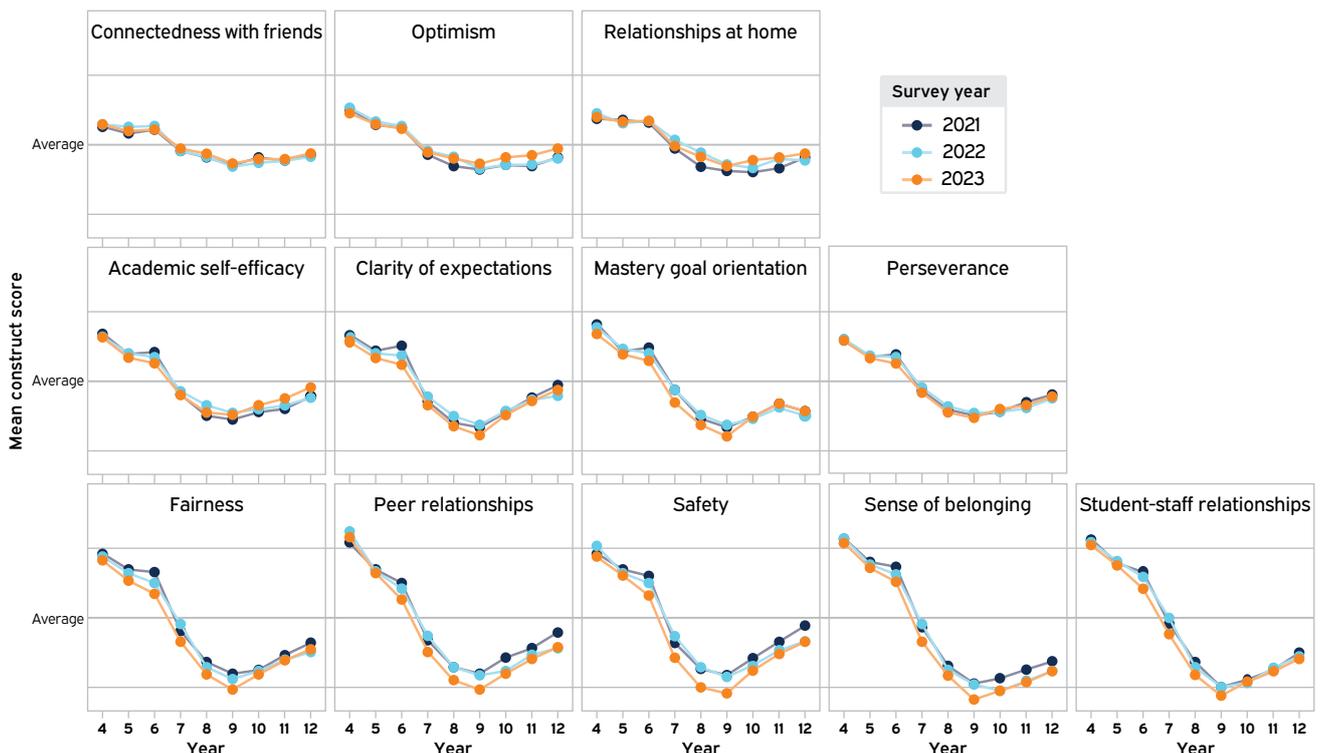
Figure 8: Average QEW Survey construct scores 2021–2023

Social-Emotional Wellbeing Survey

Between 2003 and 2017, over 135 000 students in Years 2 to 12 from more than 700 schools in Australia completed the Social-Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) Survey (ACER n.d.). This research showed the social and emotional wellbeing of a young person is determined by quality of parenting, engagement at school, community connectedness and character (values, strengths), attitudes and social–emotional skills (ACER n.d.).

Data collected over 15 years (ACER n.d.) shows that the SEWB of Australian young people has remained fairly stable with the notable exception of their:

- confidence when completing difficult schoolwork
- feelings of stress
- worries about schoolwork and what others think
- ability to control their anger.

Youth Survey, Mission Australia

Mission Australia's annual Youth Survey provides insights into Australian young people's thoughts, experiences, concerns and solutions. The 2023 Youth Survey was completed by young people aged 15 to 19 from across Australia who shared their thoughts, experiences, concerns and solutions to challenges. Of the 19 501 respondents, 3 191 were from Queensland (Mission Australia 2023b).

Based on 2023 data from Mission Australia (2023a), the most important issues in Australia today for Queensland respondents are represented in Figure 9.

Youth survey reports can be accessed from the Mission Australia website.

headspace National Youth Mental Health Survey

The National Youth Mental Health Survey is an initiative of headspace, the National Youth Mental Health Foundation. Insights from the 2022 survey (headspace 2022) show:

- young people (12 to 25-year-olds) are worried about how climate change will impact their futures, with many saying eco-anxiety is affecting their daily lives
- young people are experiencing problematic social media use and would like to disconnect, but a fear of missing out may be stopping them
- only half of young people feel confident succeeding in the next stage of their career
- almost two-thirds of young people feel left out often or some of the time, with many feeling they are cut off from the world.

Further youth mental health statistics can be accessed from the headspace website.

Most important issues identified by Queensland youth

33% environment

31% economy and financial matters

29% mental health

Biggest personal challenges for young people in Queensland

47% identified school challenges
Academic pressure, high workload, challenges with teachers, learning difficulties

65% were satisfied or very satisfied with their studies

34% said there were barriers to achieving study or goals (academic ability, mental health, financial difficulties)

21% identified mental health challenges
Low mental health, stress, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem or self-harm

21% had high psychological distress

20% felt lonely all or most of the time

31% were extremely or very concerned about coping with stress

20% identified relationship challenges
Death, abuse, challenging relationships with family, friends or significant others

24% said their family's ability to get along was fair to poor

70% said their top source of support was their friends

Figure 9: Most important issues and personal challenges identified by Queensland young people[11]

2.5 Literature scan: Adolescent wellbeing

Student wellbeing is important; for each individual it changes over time and is dependent upon personal circumstances. Wellbeing 'is not a straightforward positive-negative dichotomy, nor is it a continuum … [it is] best understood as the complex interplay between internal (subjective wellbeing) and external factors and how individuals respond to these' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] in AITSL 2022b). *Measuring engagement and wellbeing: Literature Review* (Queensland Government (Department of Education) 2019) discusses how wellbeing is defined by considering both general schools of thought and definitions for particular groups, such as students and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

As shown in Figure 10, 'children are influenced by their social, environmental, political and economic contexts … Family is the primary influence … on children's wellbeing … [while] schools play a major role in the healthy development of each child's sense of identity, and in ensuring they develop a sense of connection to others. Social and emotional learning is as much a part of education's role as academic learning' (AITSL 2022b).

Despite 'technological development and better access to services [that have] resulted in improvements to quality of life … levels of stress, anxiety and depression are rising. Education can play a role in supporting wellbeing during and beyond schooling' (OECD 2018, p1). There is a positive relationship between a student's sense of belonging at school, their academic motivation, their self-esteem and their achievement (OECD 2018).

'Poor wellbeing, school disengagement, bullying and emotional and behavioural problems … are all predictors of loss of learning' (Ramsay et al. 2020, p3). *Student wellbeing data and measurement in Australia* (Australian Education Research Organisation [AERO], 2023b) summarises research that shows students with greater wellbeing are likely to have greater engagement, which can lead to improved learning outcomes. Students who:

▸ are positively engaged can be up to six months ahead in their learning

▸ experience positive peer relationships in school can be up to two months ahead in their NAPLAN scores compared to their peers who do not experience positive peer relationships

▸ display positive behaviour at school can be up to five months ahead of students who do not display positive behaviour

▸ experience a positive sense of belonging at school have a tendency to value learning and display high levels of effort, interest and motivation, resulting in improved outcomes

▸ experience high levels of advocacy at school can display higher levels of interest and motivation and a boosted sense of belonging, which can increase the likelihood of completing school.

'Given the adverse effects of stress on well-being and its potential implication in vulnerability to adolescent depression, the need to provide children and adolescents with the skills to develop ways to manage and cope with stress is paramount.'
UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti 2017, p58

Schools can be considered one of the best environments for assisting adolescents in building resilience, providing the most significant backdrop for development in the middle years beyond the home. Further, students' emotional engagement can be strengthened by their familiarity and connection with teachers. Teachers play a crucial role in creating a supportive and positive social environment that fosters peer connections and the development of skills (Ramsay et al. 2020).

Figure 10: Ecological model of child development[12]

Wellbeing and the transition from primary school to high school

During the transition from primary school to secondary school there are increasing demands on students' self-regulation skills. 'The interaction between the external demands of the education environment, and the development of the underlying set of cognitive, social, and emotional skills needed to successfully adapt to these demands … [have during] this transition been associated with a reduction in academic well-being' (University of Queensland (unpublished), p1). Supporting students to develop their metacognition and self-regulation skills can assist them to manage changing demands as they transition from primary school to high school.

The policy brief *Promoting wellbeing and learning in the middle years: An opportune time for intervention* (Ramsay et al. 2020) acknowledges that the transition from primary to secondary school occurs at a time when students are undergoing significant biological and cognitive change. To support this transition, the report recommends:

▸ providing students with strong social and emotional support during their primary to secondary school transition; positive student relationships with peers, teachers and parents are important through this process

▸ encouraging and supporting educators to voice concerns about students to the child, their parents and school counsellors, particularly in late primary so the transition to secondary school is well supported

▸ increasing the communication between primary and secondary schools; support during the transition should be provided by both parties and be constructive and consistent in approach.

The Child to Adult Transition Study focused on health and emotional development through the middle years, specifically from eight to 14 years of age. The study included the transition from primary school to secondary school, which can be a difficult time for some students. 'Difficulties with academic studies, peer relationships, teacher relationships or changes in daily routine are encountered by 13% of students in Year 7' (Evans-Whipp et al. 2017, p4).

A key recommendation is for systems and schools to strengthen the primary to secondary school transition experience for students by:

▸ primary and secondary schools working together to develop continuity of learning approaches (where possible)

▸ ensuring quality support is provided to Year 6 students, including secondary and catchment primary schools to developing partnerships to coordinate information dissemination and support

▸ considering using Year 6 teachers to identify students potentially at risk of poor adjustment to secondary school; these students could receive additional support across the transition

▸ supporting parents' ongoing involvement in their child's learning and overall wellbeing in the secondary school years.

In responding to the needs of young adolescent learners, the research focuses on the importance of self-regulation and wellbeing. Schools must consider how both these factors are best addressed while keeping the developmental characteristics of the Junior Secondary learner in mind.

2.6 Opportunities for Junior Secondary:
On track for success to build knowledge of
the contemporary Junior Secondary learner

The evidence states:

Australian young people have:

▸ decreasing confidence about completing difficult schoolwork

▸ increasing feelings of stress

▸ increasing worries about schoolwork and what others think

▸ decreasing ability to control their anger (ACER n.d.).

The onset of mental health disorders tends to occur throughout adolescence and early adulthood, with half of all mental health problems being apparent by age 14 with symptoms beginning in primary school (Ramsay et al. 2020).

Opportunities

▸ Use the QEW Survey as a mechanism for schools and the system to monitor Junior Secondary students' mental health, school engagement and wellbeing.

The research states:

Advances in neuroscience have identified a crucially important window of opportunity in the brain development of adolescents (UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti 2017).

The adolescent brain is sensitive to experiences and is extremely malleable which means it can be moulded and learn from experiences (Steinberg 2014).

Self-regulation skills can be taught and learnt (Murray and Rosanbalm 2017).

If adolescents experience positive learning experiences supported by parents, trusted adults, schools and communities during this window, there can be a shift away from negative risk-taking and towards healthy exploration and learning (UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti 2017).

Teachers play a crucial role in creating a supportive and positive social environment that fosters peer connections and the development of skills (Ramsay et al. 2020).

Opportunities

▸ Engage researchers to build capability across the system to respond to contemporary Junior Secondary learners, including through:

› recognising and understanding adolescent developmental characteristics and their relationship to curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices

› strengthening strategies for teacher–student relationships and connections

› strengthening strategies for developing self-regulation skills and resilience that can be embedded in teaching and learning experiences

› improving strategies for helping students manage peer relationships

› improving engagement with parents to share research about the social and emotional development of their children.

▸ Support schools to reflect on opportunities to respond to the emerging evidence, and translate research into practice through their strategic planning.

🔍 The research states:

Adolescents, in the middle years, experience a dip in their social, emotional and cognitive skills, and dispositions (Learning Lab, University of Queensland, n.d.).

By attending to the unique developmental characteristics of Junior Secondary learners, their wellbeing and engagement, it is possible to mitigate the adolescent dip (Caskey and Anfara 2007; Brinegar and Caskey 2022).

🔒 Opportunities

▸ Facilitate action research partnerships with education researchers in relation to adolescent dip to better understand what is occurring, when it is occurring and the potential causes and responses.

▸ Collaborate with internal and external education stakeholders to co-design possible adolescent dip interventions and resources to support positive growth and development through adolescence.

▸ Explore the opportunity to implement system-wide approaches to student-led reflection and planning journals.

▸ Explore the opportunity to implement system-wide strategies, including case management approaches supporting transition into and through Junior Secondary.

🔍 The research states:

The transition from primary school to secondary school can be a difficult time for some students (University of Queensland unpublished).

Systems and schools can improve the transition experience for students (Evans-Whipp et al. 2017; Ramsay et al. 2020).

🔒 Opportunities

▸ Support schools to improve the primary to secondary transition experience for students by making the transition easier, safer and more welcoming, including through implementing intentional standards and pedagogy.

▸ Share examples of primary to secondary school transitions that have improved the student experience.

5 UNICEF and the World Health Organization (2021) *Teacher's Guide*, UNICEF and the World Health Organization, https://unicef.at/fileadmin/media/Infos_und_Medien/Info-Material/Unterrichtsmaterial/Teacher_s_guide_to_the_Magnificent_Mei_and_friends_comic_series_.pdf.

6 Giedd JN (2015) 'The amazing teen brain', *Scientific American*, 312(6):32–37, https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican0615-32

7 Giedd JN (2015) 'The amazing teen brain', *Scientific American*, 312(6):32–37, https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican0615-32

8 UNICEF and the World Health Organization (2021) *Teacher's Guide*, UNICEF and the World Health Organization, https://unicef.at/fileadmin/media/Infos_und_Medien/Info-Material/Unterrichtsmaterial/Teacher_s_guide_to_the_Magnificent_Mei_and_friends_comic_series_.pdf.

9 Based on Caskey and Anfara (2007). Caskey MM and Anfara VA Jr (2007) *Research summary: Young adolescents' developmental characteristics*, https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=ci_fac.

10 University of Queensland (unpublished) *Supporting metacognition and self-regulated learning during the transition to high school*, University of Queensland, Australia.

11 Based on Mission Australia (2023a). Mission Australia (2023a) *Youth Survey 2023: QLD sub-report*, Mission Australia, https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/youth-survey/state-reports-2023.

12 Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979) in Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2022) *Spotlight: Wellbeing in Australian Schools*, https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/spotlights/wellbeing-in-australian-schools.

Engaging students in their learning

'At its simplest, being engaged in something means being involved in and meaningfully connected with it. If you don't feel engaged in what you're doing, you won't care about it, and you'll be unlikely to succeed at it.'

AITSL and Innovation Unit 2018, p6

3.1 Engaging students in their learning is anchored in the SIT and the AITSL standards
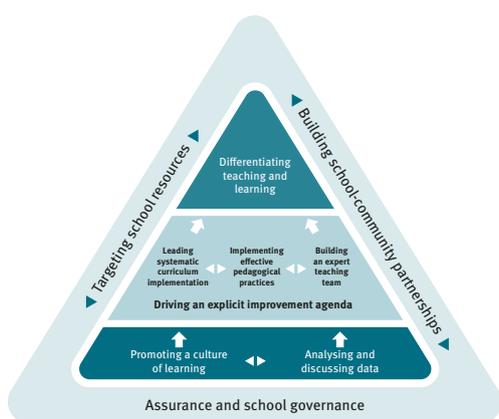
The SIT describes school leader and teacher actions that focus on strengthening student engagement to maximise outcomes for all students. These actions include:

- **driving an explicit improvement agenda** underpinned by 'high expectations for student learning progress, levels of engagement, and wellbeing' (ACER 2023, p2)

- **analysing and discussing data** by prioritising 'school-wide analysis and discussion of a broad range of systematically collected quality data on student learning, engagement, and wellbeing outcomes' (ACER 2023, p4)

- **promoting a culture of learning** by creating a culture that is 'reflective of a shared belief that all students will learn successfully and, together, school staff can make a difference to student outcomes' (ACER 2023, p6)

- **building an expert teaching team** that is working to 'develop deep understandings of how students learn' (ACER 2023, p10)

- **differentiating teaching and learning** by designing 'learning experiences that reflect students' learning needs, levels of readiness, interests, aspirations, and motivations to ensure that all students are appropriately engaged, challenged, and extended' (ACER 2023, p14)

- **implementing effective pedagogical practices** to ensure 'all students are engaged, challenged, feel safe to take risks, and are supported to learn' (ACER 2023, p16)

- **building school–community partnerships** 'to enhance student learning, engagement, wellbeing, and opportunity' (ACER 2023, p18).

The AITSL standards describe how implementing strategies to strengthen student engagement is a shared responsibility among principals, middle leaders and teachers who are tasked with:

- **leading teaching and learning:** 'principals set high standards of behaviour and attendance, encouraging active engagement and a strong student voice' (AITSL 2019, p14)

- **managing effectively:** middle leaders create 'an inclusive environment where teachers can teach well, and students can engage with and succeed in their learning' (AITSL 2024, p24)

- **knowing the content and how to teach it:** 'teachers … make learning engaging and valued. They … create and maintain safe, inclusive and challenging learning environments and implement fair and equitable behaviour management plans' (AITSL 2022a, p5).

3.2 Literature scan: Student engagement

To improve outcomes for Junior Secondary learners and to avoid the adolescent dip, it is necessary to ensure they are engaged. Research demonstrates that there are multiple aspects to consider when seeking to strengthen student engagement.

Student engagement defined

Student engagement is often defined in reference to its opposite, that is, disengagement. However, more recently, Reeves et al. (2023) define engagement as 'the mutually focused attention of students and teachers on curiosity, challenge and learning' (p2). They provide an engagement equation to enact this definition:

> ### Learning is a function of trust, safety and engagement.
>
> If you don't have trust, you can't learn.
>
> If you don't feel safe, you can't learn.
>
> If you don't engage, you can't learn.

The authors argue that engagement requires trust and psychological safety. It is the role of school leaders and teachers to provide an environment in which students feel psychologically safe so they are willing to take risks and possibly make mistakes, both vital components of learning.

Contemporary definitions of student engagement continue to use the three dimensions of engagement proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004).

The dimensions are generally defined by Lester (2013):

- Behavioural engagement is about student involvement in all school activities (academic and social), including effort, persistence, attention, asking questions, participation and participation in discussions.

- Emotional engagement can involve positive or negative reactions towards the school and/or teachers, including interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, anxiety, a sense of belonging and liking or disliking school.

- Cognitive engagement is about student motivation towards and investment in learning, including self-regulation, metacognition, dispositions towards challenging work and mastering new knowledge and skills and using learning strategies.

The Queensland Department of Education refers to these dimensions when describing student engagement (n.d.f. & 2024b).

> 'Often, we make very little distinction between being engaged in school – turning up and taking part in things that happen at school – and being engaged in the process of learning – taking actions designed to improve our understanding or skills. These 2 things are related but they are not the same thing.'
>
> Berry in Vukovic 2023

The importance of student engagement

There is a reciprocal relationship between performance and engagement, that is, engagement affects performance but improvements in performance also positively affect engagement. Students who are positively engaged can be up to six months ahead in their learning, after socio-economic status and prior achievement are taken into account (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation [CESE] 2017a). Student engagement is also directly related to future outcomes; increased student engagement can result in future educational and occupational success (CESE 2015a). According to Berry (2022),

'engagement has the potential to help students persist with challenging tasks, remain resilient in the face of setbacks or failures in learning and at school, and experience greater wellbeing' (p7).

Dr Amy Berry in Vukovic (2023) explains that 'disengagement is a serious challenge facing schools, now more than ever. Disruptive students who actively demonstrate their disengagement and disenchantment with school are the most visible, but they are merely the tip of the iceberg. Less visible, but no less concerning, is the large number of students who are passively disengaged and disconnected from learning at school.

They choose this path for a number of different reasons, but the result is the same. They fly under the radar on a pathway that limits both their potential for learning and their ability to thrive at school.'

> Disengagement, whether active or passive, can have serious and unwanted effects on a student's physical and mental wellbeing – including issues with anxiety, depression, frustration, anger and physical symptoms associated with stress.'
>
> Berry in Vukovic 2023

Engagement does not automatically guarantee learning, but higher levels of engagement tend to correlate with increased outcomes (University College of London 2021). 'Disengagement, alienation and boredom in school often peak in the middle years and this may lead to a decline in achievement. Hence the middle years, particularly with respect to the productive engagement of young people in schooling and other contexts, is a priority for educators' (Adolescent Success 2019).

When students are genuinely engaged, they are more likely to explore topics deeply, ask questions and seek understanding. Corso et al. (2013) identified that the benefits of student engagement extend to teachers. When students are paying attention, focusing, participating, mentally stimulated and having fun, teachers are more likely to enjoy being present and feel more invested, and less likely to experience burnout. 'When engagement is high and disciplinary issues are minimal, more of the teacher's time and effort can be spent on promoting learning, and less on managing distractions. Student engagement has benefits not only for the individual students and teachers, but the entire learning environment' (Corso et al. 2013, p51).

What does engagement look like?

There is a relationship between students' engagement level and their attitudes toward school (Nayir 2015). On-task behaviour is often confused with engagement (Schlechty 2011). On-task behaviour 'indicates only that a student is attentive to a task. It says nothing of the student's willingness to persist with the task when he or she experiences difficulty. It also says nothing about the value the student attaches to the task or the meaning he or she associates with the activity related to it … Even when a student is attentive and persistent, there is no assurance that the student is engaged' (Schlechty 2011, p15).

Schlechty describes an engaged student as:

Being attentive: paying attention and focusing.	**Being committed**: being intrinsically motivated to complete tasks.	**Being persistent**: persevering with tasks even when they present difficulties.	**Finding meaning and value** in tasks.

Cormier et al. (n.d.) provide a summary of Schlechty's five levels of student engagement.

Schlechty's five indicators of engagement	
Level of engagement	**Indicator of engagement**
Engaged	**Intrinsically motivated** The student pursues something without any clear extrinsic reward
Strategic compliance	**Motivated by the level of achievement** The student provides the teacher with what they want
Ritual compliance	**Motivated by receiving a 'passing' level of achievement** The student wants to finish the course with minimal effort and does not show special interest in the subject
Retreatism	**Passively resistant** The student does not distract the class, but shows little to no interest; they would prefer to not attend the class and/or will quietly not pay attention
Rebellion	**Actively resistant** The student has no interest in the learning; they feel they are being forced to learn and will act out in defiance

More recently, Berry (2022) has reimagined student engagement as a continuum of learning behaviours. Teachers' descriptions of indicators of engagement and disengagement were used to develop a continuum of engagement and disengagement. The continuum describes three forms of engagement (participating, investing and driving) and three forms of disengagement (withdrawing, avoiding and disrupting). The continuum (see Figure 11) provides an 'additional vantage point from which we can think about student engagement … from the perspective of the teacher, and an expanded vocabulary for discussing engagement within the context of classroom learning' (Berry 2022, p15). Students must be

taught how to be engaged in their learning. They then need opportunities to practice the skill of engaging to develop confidence and competence (Berry in Vukovic 2023).

In February 2023, Berry, in the role of ACER Research Fellow, commenced a 12-month study investigating student perspectives on engaging in learning at school. This will give 'young people a voice in the research into student engagement; it will also help educators to better support students to become highly engaged, active and skilled lifelong learners' (ACER News, 2023). Such research prioritising student voice will broaden the scope of existing student engagement literature, providing valuable insight in an emerging research area.

The Engagement Continuum
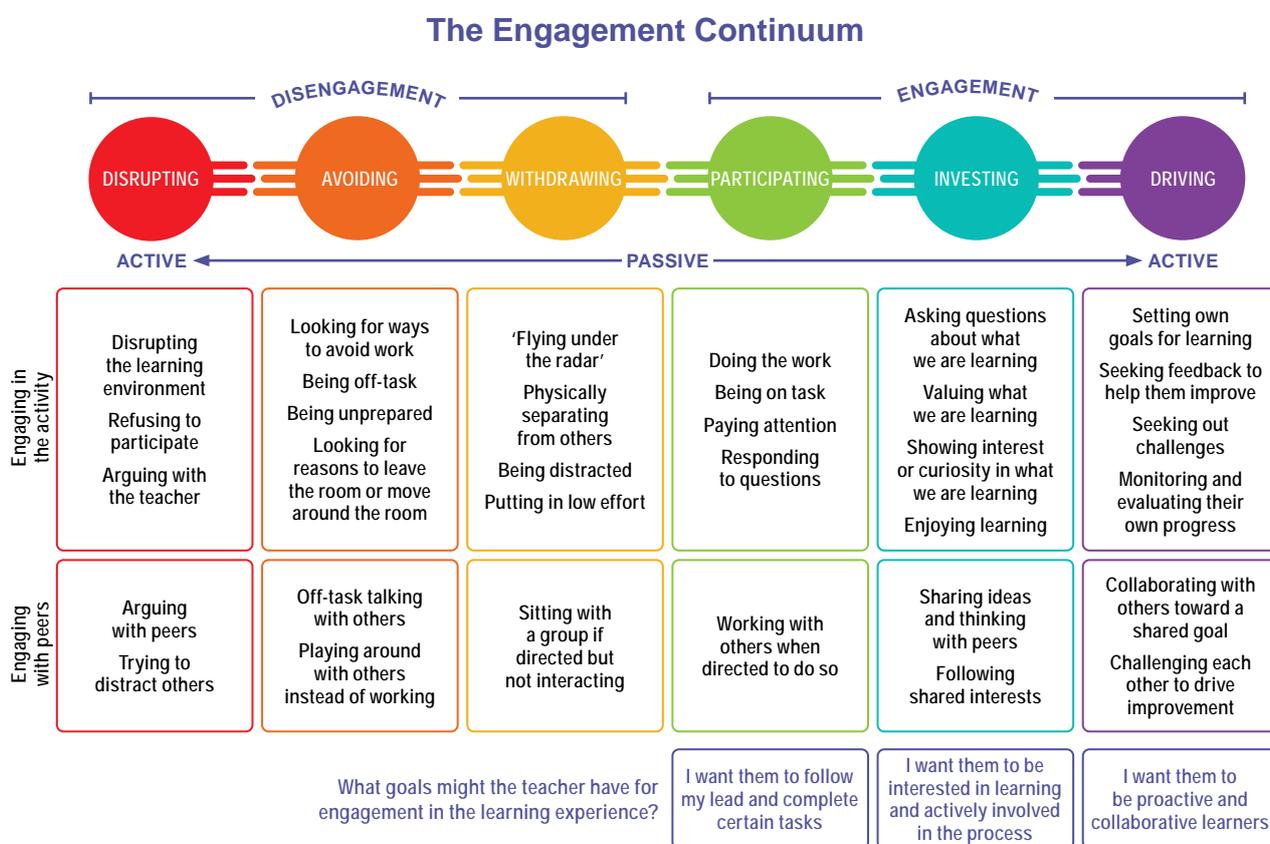
Figure 11: Disrupting to driving: A continuum of student engagement[13]

Student engagement and the transition from primary school to high school

The primary–secondary transition can affect engagement and learning in Junior Secondary. Specifically, how well students adjust when they transition to high school can impact their emotional and academic development (CESE 2017b). As such, supporting students through this transitional period has the potential to positively affect student engagement in a typically challenging time.

A decline in student engagement with schooling appears to take place during the transition from primary school to secondary school. However, students with a high sense of belonging, perception of support from teachers and

peers, and positive expectations demonstrate higher behavioural engagement with schooling and obtain good learning outcomes (Virtanen et al. 2015). A student's sense of belonging at school includes 'their perception of school, including if they feel like they belong at school, if they feel accepted at school, and if they get along with others at school' (CESE 2017b, p5). The relationship between primary and secondary schools is an important factor in supporting students during this time of transition. Practices that can strengthen this relationship are listed in Part 5 Strengthening student engagement through partnerships.

Shared responsibility for student engagement

'What happens in schools can have a great and lasting impact on the future wellbeing and outcomes for young people. Schools therefore play an important role in supporting students' engagement and wellbeing'.

ACER and Queensland DoE 2022, p1

As stated in the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Education Services Australia 2019), 'school principals and other education leaders at all levels and in all learning environments across the profession play a critical role in supporting and fostering quality teaching and learning. Education leaders are responsible for creating and sustaining high quality learning environments and conditions under which quality teaching and learning takes place. This includes instilling a culture of high expectations, collaboration and professional growth' (p11). The challenge of re-engaging students, particularly post the digital disruption of 2020, requires a renewed commitment to engagement from teachers, school leaders and the system. This is because 'without deep engagement by teachers and school leaders, the expectation that students will be engaged is wishful thinking' (Reeves et al. 2023b, p2).

The three dimensions of student engagement are closely interrelated. Positive student behaviour and attendance are measures of behavioural engagement. Attendance can be improved if students have a sense of belonging and connection with their school, teachers and peers. This sense of belonging and connection is a measure of emotional engagement. Academic interest and motivation are measures of cognitive engagement (CESE 2017a). Student engagement and effective teaching and classroom practices are not mutually exclusive and need to be considered together (Willms et al. 2009).

▶ Emotional engagement is strengthened through positive classrooms with high expectations for student success.

▶ Behavioural engagement, measured through attendance, improves when there is instructional challenge, appropriate for the learners, coupled with high expectations.

▶ Cognitive engagement requires learning environments with:
  › effective use of class time
  › positive teacher–student relationships
  › high expectations
  › instructional challenge.

The role of principals in strengthening student engagement

Principals can impact student engagement by supporting teachers to understand the value of student engagement and by giving them the independence and resources to create engagement in their classrooms (Hoerr 2016). The principal's role in leading student engagement includes ensuring teachers are engaged in their learning through relevant, interesting and successful professional development. They 'should model what we want teachers to do … should present the professional development content in an interesting, learner-friendly way … If teachers are engaged in their learning, their classrooms will be places where students achieve, push themselves, and experience joyful learning' (Hoerr 2016, p87).

'Engagement does not occur in a vacuum, but rather in an environment in which leaders consistently nurture and encourage the practices that lead to engagement.'

Reeves et al. 2023b, p136

A principal-led, design-based research project, aimed at creating a school culture of engagement, identified five key conditions for creating a culture and 'an atmosphere in which teachers are more likely to experience engagement and practise engaging teaching' (Hildebrand 2013, p20).

1. **Relationship building:** Good relationships are the cornerstone of a school culture that is engaging. 'Teachers need to feel valued, respected and supported in their work as teachers and as individuals' (p20).

2. **Opportunities for collaboration and professional dialogue:** By their nature teachers are social, and there is a connection between this characteristic and their intellectual engagement, which is strengthened when they share ideas.

3. **Time:** A culture of collaboration among teachers needs to be supported by providing time to strengthen their intellectual engagement. This support could be in the form of 'providing prep time, using administration time to cover for teachers, scheduling professional learning communities during the school day, creating time for discussion at staff meetings and using portions of professional development days to bring teachers together' (p21).

4. **Resources:** The allocation of resources needs to be strategic and responsive. This may take the form of, for example, providing funding to purchase professional reading, subsidising conference attendance, purchasing teaching resources and providing access to specialists.

5. **A climate of growth and innovation:** Intellectual engagement flourishes when teachers are 'excited about possibilities, able to be creative and willing to try something new … coupled with a culture of growth that encourage[s] teachers to strive to better themselves and the school' (p21).

The role of middle leaders in strengthening student engagement

'Middle leaders are crucial to the effective functioning of schools and play an important role in shaping student outcomes' (Day and Grice 2019). They hold dual roles of teacher and the leader of teachers, and they influence teaching and learning decisions, as they 'play a crucial role in supporting teachers, improving student achievement, and fostering a positive school culture' (Boyd 2022).

The responsibilities of middle leaders in Australian schools tend to fall into three categories (AITSL n.d.).

1. **Pedagogical leadership:** These middle leaders identify and model pedagogical practices and support classroom teachers to implement curriculum with the goal of 'strengthening teaching practices and improving student outcomes'.

2. **Student-based leadership:** All middle leaders support student outcomes; however, student-based middle leaders focus on the social development and wellbeing of a given cohort of students. They lead the 'implementation of student-based engagement approaches … mentoring staff to recognise and address indicators of student wellbeing'.

3. **Program leadership:** These middle leaders 'take ownership over specific initiatives or focus areas across their school' and, as such, support students as they respond to 'policy changes and developments in education'.

The strategic instructional leadership of middle leaders can have a greater impact on student learning than whole-of-school factors and the influence of school leaders (AITSL 2023). Olsen (2023) describes how instructional leadership influences the learning environment within a school and 'plays a crucial role in shaping student engagement and motivation' (p2) through:

▸ **setting high expectations:** when there are high expectations for teachers and students, a culture of excellence is created which can inspire and motivate studentss to be active learners working towards their goals

▸ **providing effective feedback:** when teachers receive constructive feedback, they refine their 'instructional practices and improve their ability to meet students' needs' which can result in 'engaging and meaningful learning experiences that motivate students' (p2)

▸ **promoting teacher collaboration:** when teachers work together, they learn from one another and 'can develop innovative instructional approaches that resonate with students and increase their engagement' (p2)

▸ **fostering a positive school climate:** when students feel safe, respected and supported they are more likely 'to take risks, explore new ideas, and develop intrinsic motivation for learning' (p2).

The role of teachers in strengthening student engagement

Goldspink et al. (n.d.) identify a strong connection between teachers' pedagogy and the relationships they establish with students, and students' engagement in learning. A 2017 collaboration between the CESE and the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland, confirmed not only that engaged students learn more and perform better, but also that engagement can be improved when teachers use effective teaching practices (CESE 2017a).

Pedler et al. (2020) conducted a literature review considering teachers' impact on student engagement, outlined below.

Teacher's impact on student engagement

Behavioural engagement

It is important for teachers to:

› recognise students' behavioural issues, including passive disengagement

› identify the triggers that may encourage these behaviours

› reflect upon their role in the situation.

Shifting focus to behavioural strategies that enable student engagement rather than penalising poor behaviour will improve student learning and classroom behaviour. However, there exists a divide between theory and practice. The challenge that exists is for teachers both to know the effective strategies to use and to be able to implement them appropriately.

> 'Relationship formation is central to the engagement pathway for students. Without this, excellence in pedagogy, curriculum flexibility, and policy, while necessary, will not be sufficient to re-engage the disengaged or disengaging student.'
>
> Pedler et al. 2020, p52

Emotional engagement

According to Hobbs in Pedler et al. (2020), 'when students feel cared for and noticed at school, their confidence and motivation increase, they develop better learning strategies, are more cooperative in the classroom, have a greater sense of belonging, and more positive perceptions of school' (p53). The teacher who takes an interest in the needs of individual students and creates a sense of belonging in their classroom supports the development of students' positive attitudes to learning and resilience when faced with challenges.

Cognitive engagement

Cognitive engagement is enhanced when students have clear expectations and goals for their learning, when they engage in new technologies and collaboration, and when they experience learning autonomy and ownership. The integration of hands-on, practical teaching and learning that provides opportunities for student choice supports the development of self-directed learning skills, self-efficacy and a sense of responsibility. Consequently, the instructional methods and resources that teachers select and use can significantly influence cognitive engagement.

Pedler et al. (2020) write that student interest is pliable, and that teacher support and the characteristics of an activity implemented by a teacher contribute to students' interest. How teachers present topics, rather than simply the topics themselves, creates interest for students. Moreover, teacher enthusiasm affects cognitive engagement; high enthusiasm can encourage students' interest and their readiness and willingness to learn.

Proposed model of the teacher's role in promoting the three dimensions of student engagement

The model of the teacher's role in promoting behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement proposed by Pedler et al. (2020, p55) builds upon research exploring pedagogical approaches to supporting student engagement. It uses the three dimensions of engagement to organise teacher practices. It should be noted that some of the teaching practices listed may be relevant to more than one of the student engagement dimensions.

Teachers role in promoting each dimension of student engagement[14]

Behavioural engagement
Actions/Observable behaviours

- Establish classroom **routines and procedures**
- Ensure **consistent** discipline practices and consequences
- Be **fair**
- Provide **help** to students who need it
- Use specific and genuine **praise**
- Provide **strong guidance** with clear purpose
- Communicate **clear expectations**
- Maintain **high expectations** of behaviour and learning
- Explicitly state **learning goals**
- Implement meaningful **learning goals**
- Ensure **clarity** of instruction
- Model **appropriate behaviour**
- Plan for **high levels of student participation**
- Use **non-controlling informational language**

Emotional engagement
Feelings/Internal emotions

- Foster high-quality, positive, supportive **teacher-student relationships**
- Be **caring**, understanding and nurturing
- Show **interest in students** as individuals
- **Listen** to students' points of view
- Promote **inclusion** by treating all students equitably
- Be **respectful** to all students
- Encourage students' **responsibility for their own learning**
- Offer genuine **encouragement**
- Incorporate **humour** into teaching and learning
- Promote students' **sense of belonging** in the school
- Provide opportunities for students to **experience success**
- Be **empathetic**
- Be **honest**
- Ensure all students feel **emotional and physically safe**
- Build students' **confidence**

Cognitive engagement
Thoughts/Internal cognitions

- Make the subject **interesting** by using resources and activities that promote student interest
- Provide opportunities for **deep understanding**: critical thinking, analysis and problem solving
- Provide **optimal challenge**: tasks are challenging but achievable
- Incorporate student **collaboration** in learning: active, hands-on, discussion and group work
- Incorporate authentic, **'real-world'** instruction and activities
- Ensure learning is **relevant** to students' lives and experiences
- Support students' **personal goals, interests and preferences**
- When possible, allow students to **choose** the content they learn and how to demonstrate their understanding
- Provide prompt, task-focused and specific **feedback**
- Incorporate **fun** into learning
- Display **enthusiasm** for the subject
- **Adjust teaching** to meet students' needs
- Assess students' understanding frequently and in different ways
- Provide relevant **background knowledge**
- Encourage students to **ask questions**

'Inconsistencies in teachers' understandings of student engagement … and misalignment between teachers' ideologies of effective engagement and actual engagement practices … likely underpin the "dip" in student engagement.'

Pedler et al. 2020, p55

Junior Secondary learners are not a homogenous group. As with all learners, schools and teachers must be intentional when making decisions about how they will engage Junior Secondary students.

3.3 Queensland Department of Education student engagement data

The department gathers information about student engagement through the SOS and attendance via OneSchool. These data are presented below.

Evidence from the School Opinion Survey

The background considerations for interpreting SOS data were outlined in Part 1 Junior Secondary in the Queensland context, including local context, the influence of social media users expressing opinions about education, greater societal views on education and current national and state education policy.

The SOS does not categorise statements according to the framework of emotional, behavioural and cognitive engagement. However, for the purpose of this paper, statements that have not changed from 2015 to 2023 have been selected to provide evidence about the three dimensions of student engagement.

School Opinion Survey statements organised by dimensions of student engagement

Behavioural engagement	Emotional engagement	Cognitive engagement
Teachers at my school treat students fairly.	I like being at my school.	My schoolwork challenges me to think.
Student behaviour is well managed at my school.	I feel safe at my school.	My school gives me opportunities to do interesting things.
My teachers help me with my schoolwork when I need it.	I feel accepted by other students at my school.	My teachers motivate me to learn.
	My school takes students' opinions seriously.	My teachers provide me with useful feedback about my schoolwork.
	My teachers care about me (2015–2019). My teachers are interested in my wellbeing (2021–2023).	

Figure 12 shows that agreement with all the selected SOS statements has declined since 2015 for all students, and for Junior Secondary learners (represented by Year 8 students). Only Year 8 data have been considered, because the SOS targets students in Years 5, 6, 8 and 11.

Percentage of student agreement with SOS statements

Legend: 2015 Year 8 students | 2023 Year 8 students | 2015 all students | 2023 all students

Emotional engagement

Statement	2015 Year 8	2023 Year 8	2015 all students	2023 all students
My teachers care about me/are interested in my wellbeing	85.5	65.8	89.0	82.1
My school takes students' opinions seriously	84.4	54.0	84.6	69.4
I like being at my school	92.0	58.6	91.8	73.7
I feel safe at my school	91.3	68.1	92.6	81.1
I feel accepted by other students at my school	83.8	60.2	85.1	72.2

Behavioural engagement

Statement	2015 Year 8	2023 Year 8	2015 all students	2023 all students
My teachers help me with my schoolwork when I need it	91.0	79.3	92.8	89.4
Teachers at my school treat students fairly	82.0	59.6	85.6	74.9
Student behaviour is well managed at my school	75.5	47.7	80.3	64.1

Cognitive engagement

Statement	2015 Year 8	2023 Year 8	2015 all students	2023 all students
My schoolwork challenges me to think	94.0	81.2	94.0	87.8
My teachers motivate me to learn	92.2	72.1	93.1	86.1
My teachers provide me with useful feedback about my schoolwork	90.9	75.3	92.1	86.9
My school gives me opportunities to do interesting things	92.3	78.1	91.6	86.0

Figure 12

The decline in agreement is greater for Year 8 students than for all students overall.

Comparison of percentage decline between all students and Year 8 students

SOS Statement	Percentage point decrease in student total agreement 2015–2023	
	Change in Year 8	Change in all
Emotional engagement		
I feel accepted by other students at my school	23.6	6.9
I feel safe at my school	23.2	15.2
I like being at my school	33.4	18.1
My school takes students' opinions seriously	30.4	15.2
My teachers care about me/are interested in my wellbeing	19.7	6.9
Behavioural engagement		
Student behaviour is well managed at my school	11.7	16.2
Teachers at my school treat students fairly	22.4	10.7
My teachers help me with my schoolwork when I need it	11.7	3.4
Cognitive engagement		
My school gives me opportunities to do interesting things	14.2	5.6
My teachers provide me with useful feedback about my schoolwork	15.6	5.2
My teachers motivate me to learn	20.1	7.0
My schoolwork challenges me to think	12.8	6.2

While the Year 8 decline is greater than the average (all students), all results are generally declining over time. It should be noted that no robust examination of this has been conducted by the department at this time so the statements below are in relation to the general trends and patterns in the data. The system must understand the reason for this decline, and this may be aided by a more comprehensive insight into students' interpretation of the SOS statements to which they responded. To understand how students interpreted the SOS statements before indicating their level of agreement, student voice would need to be captured regarding this matter.

There are some corresponding statements in the staff and student SOS. Figure 13 shows a comparison of staff and Junior Secondary learner (represented by Year 8 students) total agreement for the 2023 SOS.

Comparison of staff and Year 8 student SOS total agreement

■ **Staff SOS statement**   ■ **Year 8 SOS statement**

Statement	Agreement
Students are treated fairly at this school	88.3%
Teachers at my school treat students fairly	59.6%
Student behaviour is well managed at this school	73.0%
Student behaviour is well managed at my school	47.7%
This school fosters respectful relationships among all students	90.6%
I feel accepted by other students at my school	60.2%
Students value feedback about their schoolwork	85.2%
My teachers provide me with useful feedback about my schoolwork	75.3%

Figure 13

It is evident that there is a difference of perspective between staff and students with regard to:

▸ fair treatment of students
▸ behaviour management
▸ respectful relationships
▸ what constitutes useful feedback.

Evidence from OneSchool

Student attendance data is collected in OneSchool and presented in the reporting platform SORD. The graphs in Figure 14 represent attendance trends from 2019 to 2023, and the displayed numerical data in the graphs represent Semester 1, 2023.

It appears that primary students have greater attendance rates and lower unexplained absence rates than Junior Secondary students. From Years 7 to 9, the attendance rate falls and the unexplained absence rate increases.

	Attendance rate	Students <85% attendance	Unexplained absences	Students
Year 6	85.5%	24.3%	14.2%	48,903
Year 7	87.1%	28.7%	17.6%	43,119
Year 8	83.7%	38.1%	22.9%	44,711
Year 9	82.2%	41.8%	23.6%	44,295
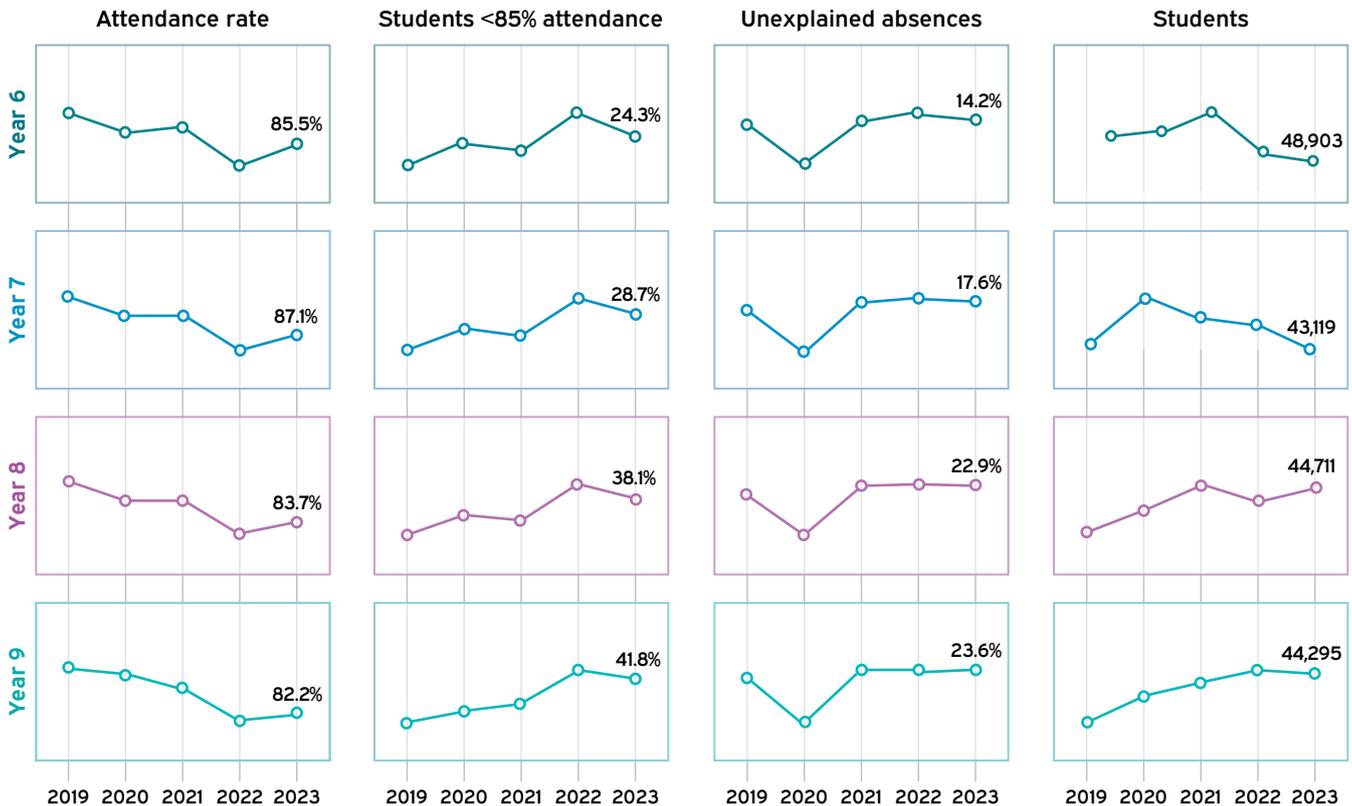
Figure 14: SORD 2019–2023 student attendance data. Generated based on the following user selections – Region ALL; School ALL; Year Level 6, 7, 8, 9

3.4 Opportunities for Junior Secondary: *On track for success* to strengthen a shared understanding about student engagement

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🔍 The evidence states:

Students feel their opinions are not valued by schools.

🔒 Opportunities:

▸ Collaborate with internal stakeholders to routinely capture student voice; this includes using the SOS as a monitoring tool for schools to reflect on how they are providing opportunities to hear and act on student voices across the school and into classrooms.

▸ Conduct statewide consultation to capture student voice to inform a Junior Secondary conceptual framework and resources.

▸ Embed practices in capability resources about how to create opportunities to hear and respond to student voices in classrooms.

🔍 The research states:

Contemporary definitions of student engagement continue to describe three dimensions of engagement: behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al. 2004; Lester 2013).

Responsibility for engaging students is shared among principals, middle leaders and teachers (AITSL 2019; 2022a; 2024).

🔒 Opportunities

▸ Build system-wide capability and develop professional learning resources specifically targeting Junior Secondary learners, including resources outlining:
  › what student engagement is and how engagement looks different for different learners
  › the impact their role can have on the three dimensions of student engagement.

▸ Strengthen messaging about the role of the system, leaders and teachers in strengthening Junior Secondary engagement.

▸ Investigate opportunities to expand beginning teacher programs to include strategies for responding to the needs of contemporary adolescent learners.

🔍 The research states:

Researchers have developed a continuum to describe students' level of engagement (Berry 2022).

🔒 Opportunities

▸ Engage researchers to further develop resources to support a shared understanding and measurement of student engagement contextualised for Queensland state schools.

▸ Investigate the potential to trial resources for measuring student engagement.

▸ Develop advice and resources for talking with parents/caregivers about student engagement.

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13 Berry A (2020) 'Disrupting to driving: Exploring upper primary teachers' perspectives on student engagement', *Teachers and Teaching*, 26(2):145–165, http://doi.org/10.1080 /13540602.2020.1757421; EngagED Consulting (2023) The engagement continuum: Developing a richer language for engagement, EngagED, https://www.engagedconsulting.au/general-6.

14 Pedler M, Yeigh T and Hudson S (2020) 'The teachers' role in student engagement: A review', *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 45(3), http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2020v45n3.4.

Strategies for strengthening student engagement

Junior Secondary is not a junior version of Senior Secondary. To be effective in the teaching of Junior Secondary students, strategies must be developmentally app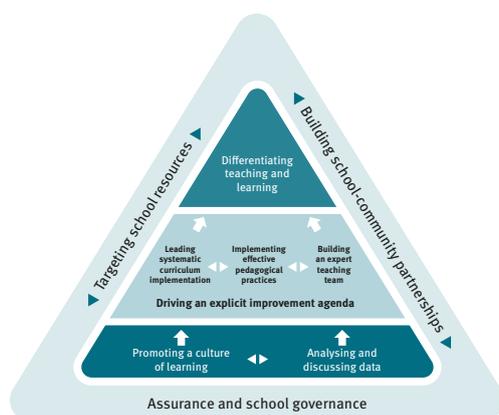ropriate for them, not for 16- to 18-year-olds. There is an expertise to teaching Junior Secondary students that is different than that needed to teach primary or Senior Secondary students.

This is a special age group. Who they are as adults has its roots in what they experience in Junior Secondary. We're building their future, and our own, with every action. Our teaching needs to be informed, responsive, and purposeful, not haphazard or indifferent.

Adapted from Wormeli n.d..

4.1 Strategies for strengthening student engagement are anchored in the SIT and the AITSL standards

The SIT describes school leader and teacher actions that focus on implementing strategies to strengthen student engagement. These actions include:

▸ **driving an explicit improvement agenda** by involving 'all stakeholders in planning for school improvement' and clearly articulating 'evidence-informed strategies for improving student learning, engagement, and wellbeing outcomes' (ACER 2023, p2)

▸ **analysing and discussing data** by systematically collecting and analysing 'a range of data, including feedback from students and families' (ACER 2023, p4)

▸ **targeting school resources** by prioritising resources 'towards evidence-informed strategies aimed at improving outcomes for students' (ACER 2023, p8)

▸ **building an expert teaching team** that is 'individually and collectively committed to the continuous improvement of teaching to enhance student learning … and expand[ing] their disciplinary knowledge to learn how to improve their current teaching practices' (ACER 2023, p10)

▸ **leading systematic curriculum implementation** through the development of curriculum 'in consultation with students, families, and the wider community to ensure flexibility, relevance, meaningful adaptation to local contexts, and responsiveness to students' learning needs, interests, and backgrounds' (ACER 2023, p12)

▸ **differentiating teaching and learning** by implementing 'targeted interventions … for students identified as requiring additional support' (ACER 2023, p14)

▸ **implementing effective pedagogical practices** using a range of 'effective, evidence-informed teaching strategies' (ACER 2023, p16).

The AITSL standards describe how the implementation of strategies to strengthen student engagement is a shared responsibility among principals, middle leaders and teachers, who are tasked with:

▸ **leading teaching and learning:** 'principals have a key responsibility for developing a culture of effective teaching, for leading, designing and managing the quality of teaching and learning and for students' achievement in all aspects of their development' (AITSL 2019, p19)

▸ **leading improvement in teaching practice:** middle leaders embed 'the use of data and research evidence to support continuous improvement' … and leverage 'collaborative practice to monitor and improve the impact of teaching on student learning and wellbeing' (AITSL 2024, p23)

▸ **planning for and implementing effective teaching and learning:** teachers 'evaluate teaching programs' and 'expand their repertoire of teaching strategies' to improve student learning (AITSL 2022a, p14–15).

4.2 Literature scan: Strategies for strengthening engagement of all learners

Having established the unique developmental characteristics of Junior Secondary learners and the need to attend to their wellbeing and engagement as evidenced through research and data, it is necessary to investigate the specific frameworks, strategies and teaching and learning practices schools and teachers can implement to strengthen engagement and mitigate the adolescent dip.

Engagement frameworks

Corso et al. (2013) argue that teachers could benefit from a framework that addresses how three elements of the classroom (teacher, student and content) enable and strengthen engagement (see Figure 15). Their Student Engagement Core (SEC) model demonstrates the interactions between the three elements. Students are more likely to be engaged in classrooms where they enjoy positive relationships with the teacher, perceive class material to be relevant, and consider the teacher an expert in the content as well as effective in helping them learn it.

Fisher et al. (2023) suggest that real engagement 'isn't just engagement of students (signs of attentiveness and fulfilling requirements); it's also engagement *by* students, evidence that they are interacting with what they learn'. With elements common to the SEC model, they provide four C's of engagement to foster engagement by students (See Figure 16).

Relationship
The interaction between the student and the teacher.

Student engagement is strengthened if the teacher is available, concerned, impartial and respectful. Students perceive teachers as caring when their classroom practice includes:

› offering help
› being mindful of students' perceptions of fairness
› taking extra time when explaining complex subject matter
› asking students authentic questions intended to get to know them on a personal level.

Relevance
The interaction between the student and the content.

Student engagement in what is being taught is strengthened when students perceive learning area content as relevant to their interests, future goals and/or sense of self or identity.

Content is relevant to the interests of students if it is related to 'experiences and ideas familiar to students and can enlarge the sense of 'significance-to-me' (p56).

Expertise
The interaction between the teacher and the content.

Expertise refers not only to teacher knowledge of the subject area content but to having a repertoire of effective pedagogical practices that will engage the learner.

When the classroom provides opportunities for students to interact and collaborate with their peers in positive and healthy ways, the adolescent need for socialising can become leverage for engagement rather than a distraction from the learning.

Figure 15: The Student Engagement Core model[15]

The four C's of engagement

1

Connections

Students thrive in classrooms where they feel known, valued and have positive human interactions. They feel connected to the learning itself when they perceive it as meaningful.

Figure 16: Fisher et al.'s four C's of engagement[16]

2

Conditions

Students are sensitive to teacher expectations. They learn best in environments where expectations are high – challenging learning intentions and success criteria are set, academic goals are co-developed with teachers and groupings are heterogeneous.

3

Challenge

Students who are supported to deal with struggle and failure will by default have their intellectual and creative risks supported. To be motivated to challenge themselves students need to:

| feel competent at what they are doing |
| understand the significance of what they are learning |
| receive actionable feedback about next steps in their learning |
| have opportunities to make decisions. |

4

Control

Students who are supported to develop self-regulation skills will increasingly draw upon their internal locus of control and own their engagement and learning. Their confidence to take on challenges will increase as they become more proficient in:

| knowing their current level of understanding |
| knowing where they need to go next in learning |
| selecting tools to guide their learning |
| seeking feedback and recognising errors as opportunities to learn |
| monitoring their progress and adjusting their learning |
| recognising their understanding and teaching others. |

> Leadership is the glue that holds the four C's together by fostering a culture of engaged staff through 'conversations, debates and deep inquiry'
>
> Reeves et al. 2023, p149

Student agency

The 2012 Australian Federal Government Student Shout Out initiative provided a platform for high school students to ask questions about the future of education. Of all participants, 34% indicated they were concerned about the failure of the education system to engage them and meet their learning needs. Students indicated they would like:

▸ 'increased agency over how they learn in the classroom and beyond

▸ more of a say about what they learn, through greater input into the curriculum and choice of subjects

▸ better teacher-student relationships' (AITSL and Innovation Unit 2018, p6).

In light of these findings, it appears that students want greater agency in their learning. However, there is no global agreement regarding what 'student agency' means. The term is often incorrectly used as a synonym for 'student autonomy', 'student voice' and 'student choice'. Despite this, student agency is not students voicing whatever they want or choosing whatever they wish to learn (OECD 2019).

According to Wormeli and Nickelsen (n.d.), student agency is when 'students self-initiate and persevere in their own learning through partnership with others and empowerment … [It] is not one event or factor, but rather a continuous cycle of growing and learning based on students' interests, background knowledge/experiences, and what they perceive is meaningful to them. There is a passion, flow, and initiative to keep learning until goals are met or new ones are formed, even when confronted with serious hurdles along the way.'

Leadbeater (2017, p3) describes agency as 'acting rather than to be acted upon; shaping rather than to be shaped; and choosing rather than to accept choices decided by others'. Schools should be places where students 'develop a sense of agency and responsibility, learning how and when to take the initiative, how to turn an idea into something tangible, often working with others to do so' (p11). Leadbeater describes the 'best' schools as those that provide dynamic education delivered by dynamic teachers who facilitate learning

that is engaging, demanding and rewarding while acting as an instructor, designer, guide, coach and facilitator. 'Dynamic learning involves both students and teachers doing great work together' (p12).

Poon (2018) describes student agency in layman's terms as students taking an active role in their education rather than having school 'done to them'. Poon acknowledges that there is wider agreement in the literature on four components of student agency, those being when students:

▸ set advantageous goals

▸ initiate action toward those goals

▸ reflect and revise those goals

▸ internalise self-efficacy.

Teachers need to support students for students to exercise their agency and realise their potential (OECD 2019). Poon (2018) describes what teachers can do to support students through each of the four student agency components. They can:

▸ design pathways of learning that support students' awareness of their current strengths and weaknesses alongside a developing sense of where they want to go

▸ help students develop 'voice, choice, free will, freedom, individual volition, self-influence, and self-initiation' by providing opportunities to choose strategies and tactics for meeting a goal and allowing them to deviate from their peers to explore something relevant to them (teaching strategies such as organisation, note-taking and rehearsing can also encourage independent learning)

▸ assist students to develop a growth mindset and reinforce their self-efficacy by giving them numerous chances to acquire and demonstrate their understanding, stretching them, providing anecdotes about peers and role models who have overcome challenges, continuing to reinforce a growth mindset and paying close attention to students' physical and emotional needs.

Student voice

In *Capturing and Measuring Student Voice* (CESE 2016), student voice is identified as 'the perspective of students on their experience of education … It is also about recognising that students have distinctive views on their schooling; and affording students the opportunity to influence their own school experience by listening and responding to student feedback' (p1).

> 'Student voice can provide schools with 'not only an understanding of the values, beliefs and opinions of students, but … a tool that can be used to improve student outcomes.'
>
> CESE 2016, p2

CESE (2016) has summarised research identifying the importance of measuring student voice.

▸ Student voice is considered one of the best ways to measure student engagement and can be particularly useful for measuring emotional and social engagement. Providing an opportunity for students to provide feedback may increase student effort, participation and engagement in learning. Similarly, there could be an improvement in motivation, sense of inclusion and citizenship.

▸ Capturing student voice can be an informing tool for school planning and improvement, making teaching and learning more visible. This can result in 'discussion and debate among teachers about their teaching practice. In response to student feedback, teachers may develop new perspectives on what and how they teach and make improvements as a result' (p2).

▸ Countries that perform well in the Programme for International Student Assessment and the Teaching and Learning International Survey tend to be more likely to seek feedback from students and respond to student voice in their schools. 'For instance, 87 per cent of principals of 15-year-olds in Singapore seek written feedback from students for quality assurance and school improvement, compared with 69 per cent of principals in Australia' (p2).

The Quaglia Institute (2020) provides a definition of voice that comprises three key components and is inclusive of all voices in the school community, student and adult. Voice is:

▸ sharing thoughts and ideas in an environment underpinned by trust and respect

▸ offering realistic suggestions for the good of the whole

▸ accepting responsibility for not only what is said but also what needs to be done.

Quaglia writing for the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2015) explains the connection between educators listening to students' voices and students' aspirations and academic motivation. When students are meaningfully engaged in learning they are 17 times more likely to be academically motivated, and when students have a sense of purpose, they are 18 times more likely to be academically motivated. He defines 'meaningful engagement in learning' as students understanding why they are learning things and the connection of those things to them. If educators understand their students' hopes and dreams, they can support meaningful engagement and a sense of purpose.

> 'Young people who find their own voice in supportive school environments are more likely to develop a confident voice, a capacity to act in the world, and a willingness to lead others.
>
> By empowering students, we enhance student engagement and enrich their participation in the classroom, school and community. We help students to "own" their learning and development, and create a positive climate for learning.'
>
> Victorian Government (DET) 2019, p6

Wellbeing can be enhanced if there is a shared definition of voice applied across a school community, where voice incorporates a sense of agency and autonomy. Creating conditions in the classroom to successfully capture student voice 'requires explicit planning, a shared language, and a common understanding about what is important and valued as a community' (Bryen 2022, p62). Strategies include:

▸ providing opportunities for students to actively use their voice in classroom activities, which can create improvements in classroom culture and learning outcomes

▸ co-creating success criteria, which can create buy-in or shared commitment to a common goal (as part of this process, teachers could highlight relevant personal and social capabilities from the Australian Curriculum that would sit alongside academic learning intentions)

▸ including student self-assessment in reports to encourage reflection and responsibility for learning, which would be further strengthened if followed by student-led conferencing to develop their next learning goals.

Evidence-based models of teaching and learning that engage all learners

According to AERO (2024), 'evidence-based practice … refers to the teaching practices that research has shown will have the greatest impact on student learning'. Aligning teaching practices with how students learn is most effective for improving education outcomes. 'There is strong evidence about the processes that occur during learning. These processes explain why some teaching practices are more effective than others' (AERO 2023c, p1).

High-impact teaching strategies

Vukovic (2021) summarises John Hattie's work on evidence-based teaching and learning strategies. Effect sizes (quantitative measures of impact) for 100 teaching innovations over 300 000 studies, were established.

▸ A zero effect size indicates no effect on achievement.

▸ A negative effect size indicates the innovation reduces achievement.

▸ A positive effect size indicates the innovation enhances achievement. The goal is to implement strategies that enhance achievement by more than the average (0.40 effect size). Anything less is holding back a student, as at least half the effects can attain growth greater than 0.40.

The department, in collaboration with AITSL, reviewed contemporary research about learning. Ten pedagogical practices for learning surfaced most frequently in literature, were identified as having the greatest impact on student achievement, and aim to move students' learning from dependent to independent. The ten practices identified as having effect sizes above 0.40 are:

▸ collaborating

▸ developing language

▸ engaging with feedback

▸ explicit instruction

▸ learning goals

▸ making connections

▸ metacognition and reflecting

▸ practising

▸ questioning

▸ releasing responsibility.

High impact teaching strategies (HITS) are 'instructional practices that reliably increase student learning wherever they are applied' (Victorian Government (DET) 2020a, p5). They are not intended to replace other teaching strategies teachers might already successfully use, but they add to the repertoire of effective strategies that teachers can apply. A scan of Australian jurisdictions indicates alignment between the HITS identified by the Queensland Department of Education and those identified for schools in New South Wales and Victoria.

Similarly, Masters (2018) states that highly effective teachers have a repertoire of evidence-informed teaching strategies from which they select to engage individual students, set ambitious but realistic learning goals, and target teaching to address individual learning needs. Masters argues that evidence-based teaching requires more than implementing practices that have been shown to be effective in controlled research studies. A key part of gathering evidence involves teachers knowing where to pitch their teaching and learning program, and monitoring whether it is effective. This can be achieved by asking:

▸ Is this approach working?

▸ It is improving learning for my students?

▸ Is it having the desired impact?

> Quality teaching is one of the strongest influences on student learning. It is what teachers know, do, and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation.
>
> Hattie 2003, p2

AERO has developed a model of learning and teaching (see Figure 17) together with 'how to' guides for practices that have proven to affect student learning outcomes. They complement and support existing Australian resources such as the APST and guidance offered by systems. The model aligns elements of how students learn to relevant teaching practices while recognising that engagement and learning have a reciprocal relationship and students learn best in safe and supportive learning environments (AERO 2023c). The learning and teaching model focuses on four key areas.

▸ Learning is a change in long-term memory – teachers develop a teaching and learning plan for the knowledge students will acquire.

▸ Students process limited amounts of new information – teachers manage the cognitive load of learning tasks.

▸ How students develop and demonstrate mastery – teachers maximise retention, consolidation and application of learning.

▸ Students are actively engaged when learning – teachers foster the conditions of a learning-focused environment.

How students learn

Attention and focus
Students are actively engaged when learning
› Sensing, thinking and memory
› Readiness for learning
› Self-regulation
› Safety and belonging

Knowledge and memory
Learning is a change in long-term memory
› Novice learners
› The developing brain
› Working and long-term memory
› Consolidation

Retention and recall
Students process limited amounts of new information
› Cognitive load
› Recall and retention
› Additional learning needs

Mastery and application
Students develop and demonstrate mastery of their learning
› Application of knowledge
› Mental models
› Problem solving, critical and creative thinking
› Generative learning

Teaching that aligns with how students learn

Enabling
Foster the conditions of a learning-focused environment
› Rules and routines
› Respectful interactions
› Self-regulated learning
› Cultural safety
› Family engagement

Planning
Develop a teaching and learning plan for the knowledge students will acquire
› Define knowledge
› Chunk content
› Sequence instruction
› Plan to assess

Instruction
Manage the cognitive load of learning tasks
› Explain learning objectives
› Teach explicitly
› Scaffold practice
› Monitor progress
› Support tiered interventions

Gradual release
Maximise retention, consolidation and application of learning
› Revisit and review
› Vary practice
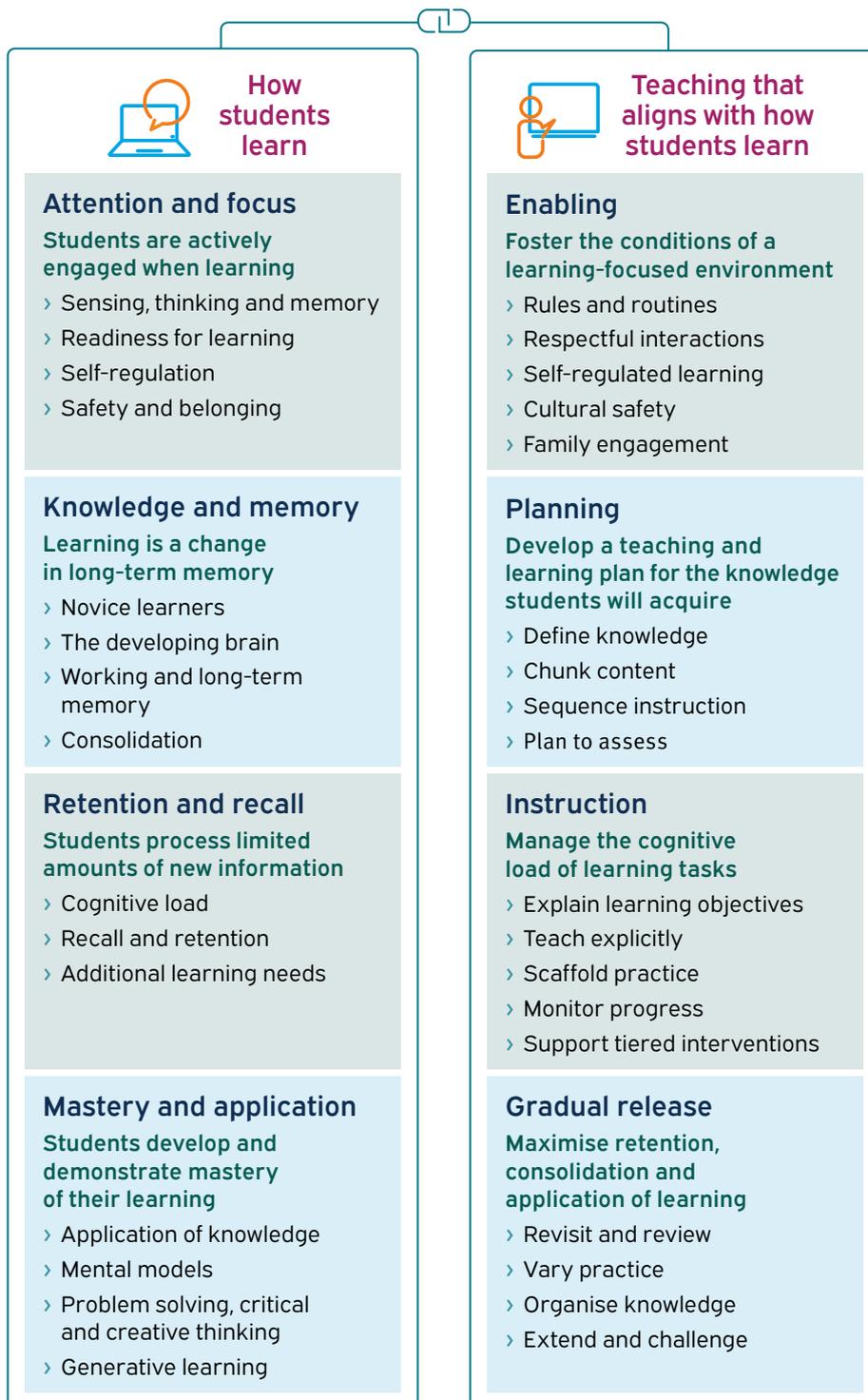› Organise knowledge
› Extend and challenge

Figure 17: A model of teaching and learning[17]

Evidence-based strategies for teaching metacognition and self-regulation

Metacognition is a sub-element of the Critical and Creative Thinking general capability of the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] 2024). Evidence-based practices for integrating metacognitive instruction into teaching and learning range across a continuum from teacher-led to student-led (University of Queensland unpublished) (see Figure 18).
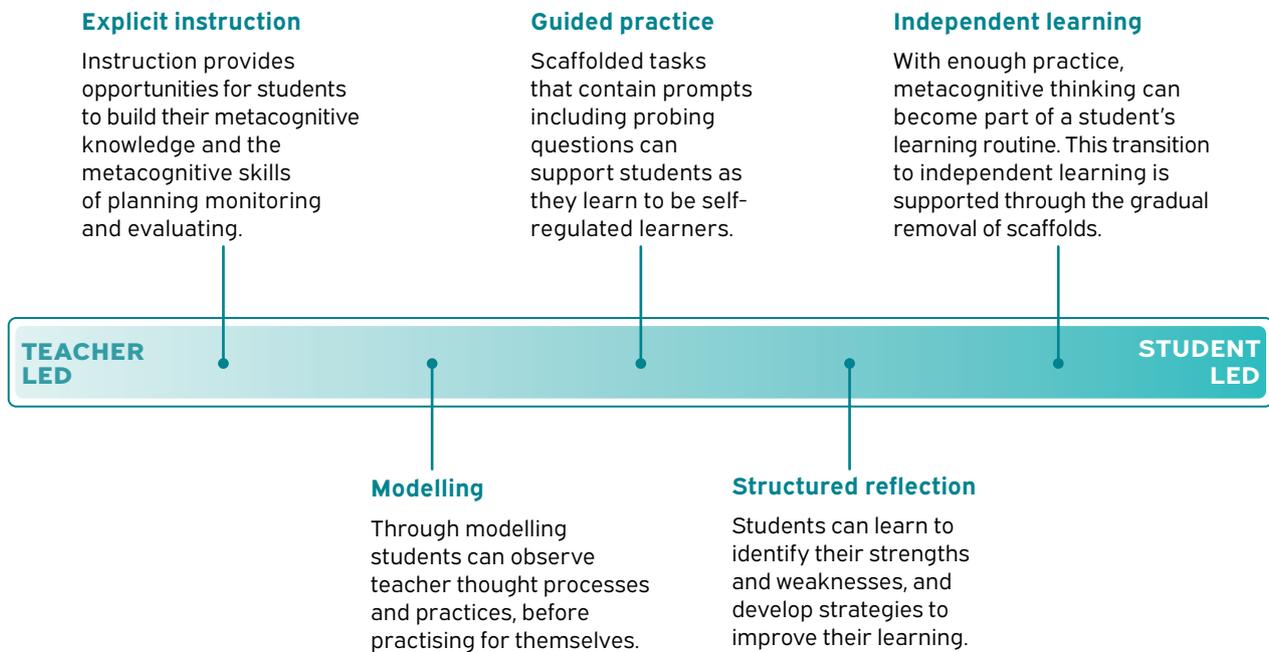
Explicit instruction

Instruction provides opportunities for students to build their metacognitive knowledge and the metacognitive skills of planning monitoring and evaluating.

Guided practice

Scaffolded tasks that contain prompts including probing questions can support students as they learn to be self-regulated learners.

Independent learning

With enough practice, metacognitive thinking can become part of a student's learning routine. This transition to independent learning is supported through the gradual removal of scaffolds.

TEACHER LED — **STUDENT LED**

Modelling

Through modelling students can observe teacher thought processes and practices, before practising for themselves.

Structured reflection

Students can learn to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and develop strategies to improve their learning.

Figure 18: Continuum of metacognitive instructional practices[18]

Multi-tiered systems of support

All students benefit from high-quality, evidence-based teaching strategies, such as multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). MTSS frameworks 'are designed to ensure that all students are provided with a positive and supportive learning environment, where access to evidence-based support is timely and based on individual student need' (de Bruin and Stocker 2021, p1). AERO (2023a) defines MTSS as 'a tiered model of instruction and intervention that starts with high quality core classroom instruction' (p2) and which should be a part of a whole-school, evidence-based instruction model with universal student screening, evidence-based interventions and continuous, data-based progress monitoring. MTSS is a tiered model of instruction used to support the teaching of literacy and numeracy, which includes:

▸ 'a school-wide, multi-level system of instruction
▸ high-quality classroom instruction
▸ universal student screening
▸ evidence-based interventions provided on a sliding scale of intensity
▸ continuous, data-based progress monitoring' (p3).

Within MTSS (see Figure 19), Tier 1 instruction refers to universal instruction that the whole class receives: for example, instruction, spacing and retrieval, and

formative assessment. At Tier 2, targeted support is given to some students with gaps in knowledge or skills. Tier 3 support or intervention is intensive and directed to the few students who do not respond to Tier 2 intervention.

If schools find that increasing numbers of Years 7 to 9 students require Tier 2 and 3 support, 'an investigation of the pedagogical practices used in classrooms (as part of Tier 1 instruction) should be undertaken to ensure all teachers are implementing evidence-based practices with fidelity' (AERO 2023a, p4).
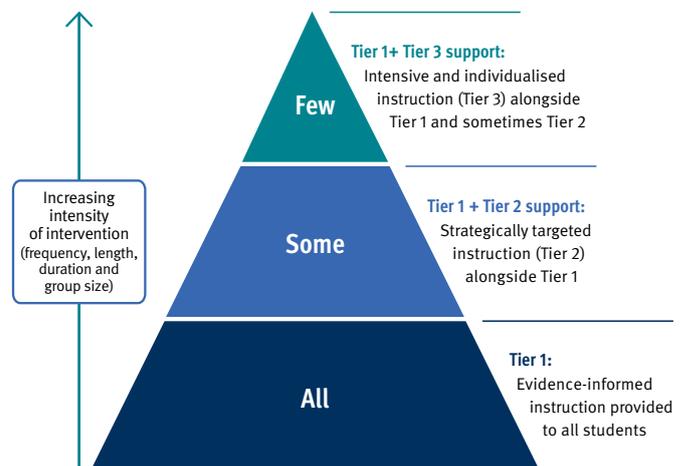
Increasing intensity of intervention (frequency, length, duration and group size)

Few — **Tier 1+ Tier 3 support:** Intensive and individualised instruction (Tier 3) alongside Tier 1 and sometimes Tier 2

Some — **Tier 1 + Tier 2 support:** Strategically targeted instruction (Tier 2) alongside Tier 1

All — **Tier 1:** Evidence-informed instruction provided to all students

Figure 19: How tiers of support work in a multi-tiered system of supports[19]

De Bruin and Stocker (2021) explore the implementation of MTSS for the teaching of reading in a range of school contexts, with a focus on implementation in secondary schools. When students transition into secondary, their existing achievement history and additional assessments can be used to identify if fast-tracking to Tier 2 or Tier 3 support is required.

Surfacing pathways learning

'Supporting each student on meaningful pathways to success is everyone's shared responsibility. By laying a firm foundation, students can be equipped with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to succeed as flexible and resilient lifelong learners in the workplaces of tomorrow.'

Queensland Government (DoE) 2023c

In the context of pathways into and through senior schooling, the department aims 'to support every student … and prepare them to successfully transition from school to further education, training or employment' (Queensland Government (Department of Education) 2023d, p1). This can be achieved through high-quality career education that supports students to use knowledge about themselves and the rapidly changing world, and develop the skills, knowledge and capabilities that will be valued in the workplaces of the future. School engagement research shows that students who see their education as relevant and directed towards preparing them to achieve their future goals are more likely to perform well in school. Career learning experiences can develop identity, a sense of belonging and ideas about future roles in society. Providing students with opportunities for career exploration can have a positive effect on their school engagement (New South Wales [NSW] Government Department of Education 2021).

'The evidence also suggests that career development is best started early so that by the time young people are facing choices about academic and vocational direction, they have a frame of reference within which to exercise these choices and the skills to follow them through.'

Sampson et al. 2011, p12

Career development programs that are connected to existing teaching strategies will be more effective at engaging students. The results of a longitudinal study by Orthner et al. (2013) into the implementation

of a school-wide strategy that attempts to positively influence the educational and workforce trajectory for all students, reveals that students who report exposure to more career examples as part of their core subject instruction are more likely to report higher levels of both school valuing and school engagement.

To be effective, school-based career guidance must be student centred and tailored to the individual needs, interests and circumstances of school students (Shergold et al. 2020). This can be achieved by surfacing pathways learning into teaching and learning programs. Hooley (2021) outlines the following benefits to embedding career education into school programs.

▸ **Increased engagement:** Thinking about the future and learning about the world is exciting. It will help students to see the relevance of what they are learning and to think about why it is important to work hard.

▸ **Increased equity of outcomes:** Career education has a positive impact on social mobility and social justice. It links disadvantaged young people to new resources and gives them inspiration.

▸ **Improved long-term outcomes:** Enhancing young people's knowledge and skills about career will set them on the right path. In the long run this will lead to better career outcomes for all students.

Shergold et al. (2020) highlight that students need objective, unbiased and up-to-date career information, and that career guidance should be provided before Senior Secondary school. In the report, a Victorian Department of Education case study discusses the introduction of initiatives across Years 7 to 12 following a review of career education. These initiatives include resources to support students from Year 7 to understand their interests, skills, values and aspirations, and explore the world of work through classroom activities and encounters with employers and industry. Schools are provided with advice and resources to map career education across the curriculum and to embed career education across every year level. The goal of implementing a broader range of career education activities for students from Years 7 to 12 includes providing support to students at risk of disengaging or not making a successful transition to further education, training or secure employment.

As part of the *Good people. Good Jobs: Queensland workforce strategy 2022–2032* the department launched career education programs designed to support the delivery of effective career-related learning. Purposeful career education programs and embedded learning experiences from Prep to Year 12 will assist students to build knowledge, attitudes and skills appropriate to their age, capability and maturation (see Section 4.4). In the context of Junior Secondary, 'adolescence can be a time of great change.

As young people formulate and reformulate their goals for the future, academic and career choices assume increasing importance. Social relationships expand, and emotions can intensify and become more complex. Young peoples' academic, career and social choices and experiences are closely connected and are reflected in the emerging complexities of adolescence. Integrating social and emotional learning into career guidance can help young people feel better prepared to navigate the multi-faceted transitions into post-secondary education or into the world of work' (Howard and Ferrari 2023, p2).

Supporting professional practice through school clusters

Working in school clusters can be an effective mechanism to support sustainable pedagogical change (Jensen et al. 2016). AITSL and Innovation Unit (2018) proposed, through the Learning Frontiers project, the concept of Design Hubs: ecosystems of schools and other organisations interested in learning that come together with the common goal of increasing student engagement in learning. Together they will 'learn about and test professional practices that increase student engagement in learning' (p20). When schools work together to test new practices, a more rigorous evidence base about impact is formed. These

Design Hubs are driven by exploratory questions and underpinned by four design principles, namely that learning is engaging when it is:

▸ **co-created:** teachers, parents and community are involved in designing the what, how, when and where learning will occur; as a result, students are more engaged, knowledgeable and independent, and become more invested in their learning

▸ **personal:** when learning is personal it is understood and appreciated by students. Students are given regular, timely, individualised feedback; consequently, their confidence and motivation to take responsibility for their own learning and to be involved in supporting the learning of others is strengthened. Student engagement is increased when they have more choice and autonomy

▸ **connected:** learning that is connected with a real-world context or purpose has meaning and value to students as it connects with their interests, passions and needs, as well as to global issues

▸ **integrated:** 'when learning is integrated it is a seamless, logical and meaningful experience for learners, teachers and parents' (p18); this includes the development of skills and the acquisition of knowledge.

4.3 Literature scan: Considerations for engaging Junior Secondary learners

It could be argued that the examples of strategies for strengthening student engagement outlined above are applicable across all phases of learning: 'Starting strong', 'Building on foundations', 'On track for success' and 'Ready for the future'. However, to differentiate engagement strategies and practices for Junior Secondary learners, we must understand both characteristics of the adolescent learner (see Part 2 The contemporary Junior Secondary learner) and the features of effective learning environments that engage young adolescents.

Understanding the interplay between the learner and the learning environment is critical for Junior Secondary: *On track for success*. The data highlighted in this paper reveal that the system could do better at engaging Junior Secondary learners; together, the research and jurisdictional scans will assist with identifying next steps.

Effective learning environments

Successful education in the middle years requires an 'intentional approach to teaching and learning that is responsive and appropriate to the full range of needs, interests and achievements of young adolescents' (Adolescent Success 2019). This success is achieved when four interconnected concepts are considered.

Adolescents: Young adolescents are changing intellectually, physically, emotionally, socially and ethically.

Places: The places of learning in the middle years are flexible, diverse, democratic, positive, safe and engaging.

Educators: Those who educate in the middle years are dedicated, knowledgeable, empathetic, passionate and relational.

Pedagogy: The pedagogy used in the middle years is informed, inclusive, relevant, pastoral, global, innovative, challenging, integrative and responsible.

Similarly, the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE, USA), affirms that young adolescents deserve an education that is responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable and engaging. These essential attributes are unpacked into 16 characteristics of successful middle schools and classrooms as illustrated in Figure 20.
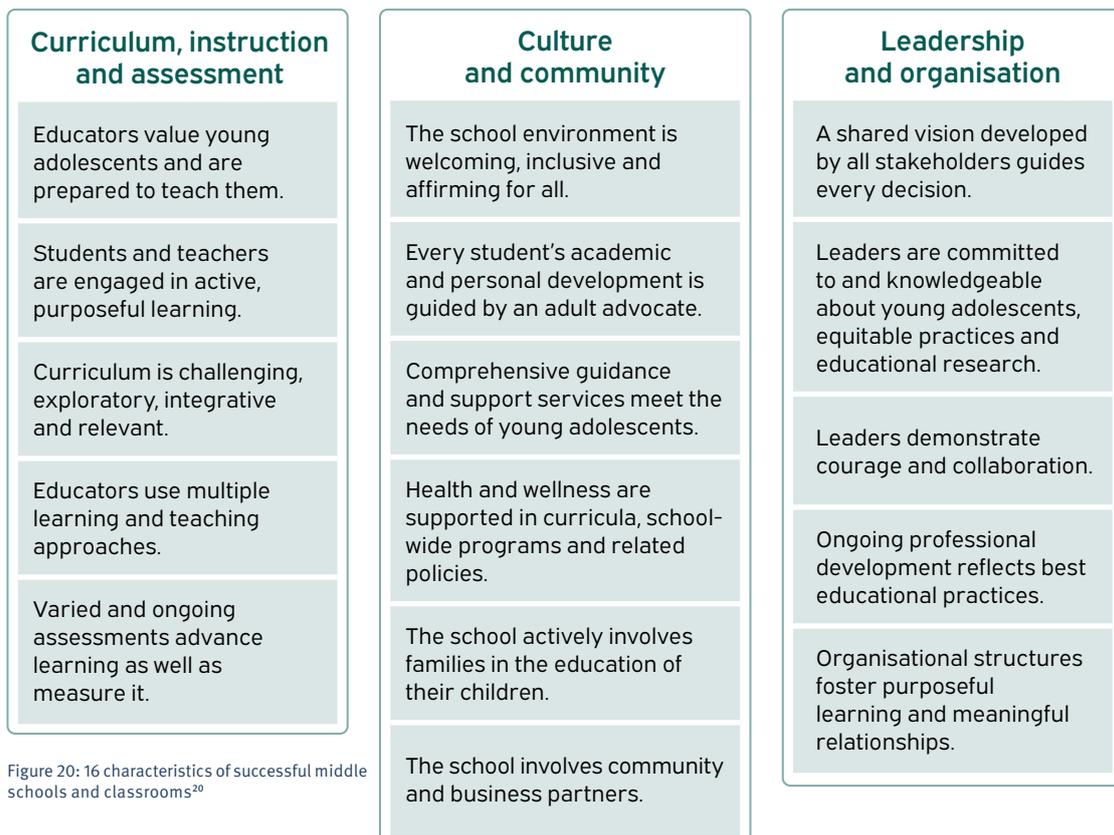
Curriculum, instruction and assessment	Culture and community	Leadership and organisation
Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.	The school environment is welcoming, inclusive and affirming for all.	A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.
Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.	Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.	Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about young adolescents, equitable practices and educational research.
Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative and relevant.	Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.	Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.
Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches.	Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs and related policies.	Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices.
Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.	The school actively involves families in the education of their children.	Organisational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.
	The school involves community and business partners.	

Figure 20: 16 characteristics of successful middle schools and classrooms[20]

The implications of adolescent developmental characteristics for classroom practice

Brinegar and Caskey (2022) state that 'all young adolescents deserve educational experiences and schools that address their physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and psychological developmental characteristics in culturally sustaining and affirming ways'. Caskey and Anfara (2007) and Brinegar and Caskey (2022) have identified considerations for classroom practice that will ensure young adolescent students receive the experiences they deserve and that prepare them for an ever-changing world (see Figure 21).

Consider how physical developmental characteristics may affect adolescents' emotional/psychological and social development.

▸ Minimise situations that promote competition and possible comparisons between early- and late-maturing students.
▸ Organise participation through a variety of hands-on learning experiences including simulations.

Consider the varying intellectual developmental differences of young adolescents.

▸ Provide a wide variety of pedagogical approaches and materials that are appropriate for students' varied cognitive abilities.
▸ Use real-world contexts supported by authentic activities that are meaningful for adolescents.
▸ Encourage discourse with peers and adults, and hands-on experience.
▸ Provide opportunities for exploration.
▸ Serve as adult role models to support adolescents to connect intellectual and moral reasoning by teaching through example.

Capitalise on the relationship between adolescents' intellectual development and their moral reasoning.

▸ Provide opportunities for students to articulate their thoughts and feelings.
▸ Contemplate moral/ethical dilemmas and consider possible responses.
▸ Incorporate scenarios that prompt young exploration of concepts such as fairness, justice and equity.
▸ Address societal issues such as racism, sexism and discrimination

Support adolescents' identity formation.

▸ Ensure that every student is known well by at least one adult.
▸ Foster positive relationships among peers.
▸ Build an atmosphere of friendliness, concern and group cohesiveness free from harsh criticism, humiliation and sarcasm.

### Provide opportunities for adolescents to form positive and healthy relationships with peers.

▸ Provide opportunities for peer interactions that are positive and constructive.
▸ Provide experiences that encourage freedom and independence within a safe space.
▸ Plan activities that engage students in argumentation or debate and simulate social situations through role-plays or simulations.
▸ Plan cooperative learning activities and collaborative experiences that provide opportunities for adolescents to interact productively with peers.

Figure 21: Implications of adolescent developmental characteristics for practice[21]

4.4 Queensland Department of Education initiatives for strengthening student engagement

The department is delivering a range of policy-aligned initiatives to strengthen student engagement. Figure 22 highlights initiatives being implemented by the department to strengthen student engagement and re-engagement. While affirmed by the research, it is noted that the initiatives are for all students; it is timely to reflect on these initiatives and to view them through a Junior Secondary lens so advice and strategies specific to this group of learners can be described.
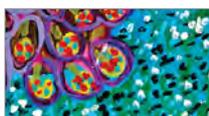
First Nations attendance and engagement programs are funded by the department to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who are disengaged, or at risk of disengaging, to attend school; engage in learning; complete Year 12; and transition into employment, training or further education.

A Whole School Approach to Pedagogy is a flexible, responsive and ongoing process that supports schools to employ the most effective pedagogies to maximise the achievement, engagement and wellbeing of all students.

Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) is a whole-school framework that supports schools to improve social, emotional, behavioural and academic outcomes for students. PBL provides a continuum of interventions at three levels:

- Tier 1: Universal support for all students.
- Tier 2: Targeted support for at-risk students.
- Tier 3: Individualised support.

The Classroom Management Hub is a one-stop shop for evidence-informed strategies for classroom management. It provides classroom teachers with an overview of the practices that have been shown to have the greatest positive impact on learning, wellbeing and behaviour.

M in STEM: Transforming Mathematics school clusters seeks to improve mathematics pedagogy, student achievement and/or disposition, and clarity around the mathematical processes. It also addresses teaching First Nations learners and joining leading mathematics education researchers to discuss classroom experiences and share what works.

Reflection Tool: Building Student Success in Years 7 to 10 provides stimulus to facilitate professional conversations between regions, school and curriculum leaders, and teachers to identify strategies and evidence that will build student success in Years 7 to 10 for a successful transition to Years 11 and 12.

The Student Learning and Wellbeing Framework guides schools to implement a whole-school approach to supporting students' wellbeing and mental health. It is accompanied by the Student Learning and Wellbeing Reflection and Implementation Tool that supports school communities to identify their strengths, priorities and areas for further action when implementing or adapting a whole-school approach to student wellbeing.

The Career Education: Pathways Program offers evidence-informed, intentional career education designed to prepare all students in Years 7 to 10 to make informed decisions about their study and post-schooling pathways. Strong focus is placed on students understanding themselves, engaging with authentic career information and developing strategies to adapt to the changing and global nature of work. All resources are aligned to the Australian Blueprint for Career Development and the Australian Curriculum.
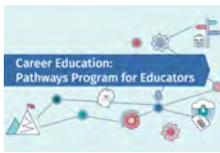
 Career Education: Pathways Program for Educators aims to increase the confidence and capability of educators to deliver high-quality, meaningful and personalised career-related learning experiences for students. It explores how educators can surface career-related learning experiences and the positive impact career-related learning can have on students, staff and the wider community.

 The QEW Survey aims to collect information from Queensland state schools in a consistent and systematic way to gain a better understanding of the engagement and wellbeing of Queensland students.

 Phones away for the day supports schools to maintain a strong focus on student educational achievement, wellbeing and engagement by reducing the distraction of mobile phones and other devices.

 Youth Engagement: Practice Insights provides an evidence-based guide for schools seeking to promote best practice in student engagement alongside academic achievement. It uses established research to define capabilities and practices that put engagement at the heart of professional practice.

 Everybody's Business outlines an evidence-based approach to meeting the needs of children and young people who are at risk of disengagement, or who are disengaged from education.

 FlexiSpaces are an in-school tool to provide short-term support for students who are showing early signs of disengaging from learning. They are purpose-built learning environments with flexible furniture and learning zones, where teachers tailor their teaching and curriculum to reconnect students who would benefit from additional support to learning.

 A Regional Youth Engagement Service exists in every Department of Education region. These services help young people who have become disengaged to reconnect with education, training or employment.

 Students with a disability have the right to be consulted about any adjustments that will enable them to access and participate in education. Video and fact sheets have been developed about the benefits of student voice in this context and strategies for respecting student voice. This is an example of the department's commitment to the Inclusive Education policy.

 Ministerial Student Advisory Council provides Queensland students with an opportunity to share their perspectives on important education matters and the impact of broader issues on learning.

Figure 22: Queensland Department of Education student engagement initiatives

4.5 Jurisdictional scan: Strategies for strengthening student engagement

A scan of Australian state and territory education websites shows that strengthening student engagement is a key priority across Australia. Similar to Queensland, several countrywide initiatives value stakeholder consultation and data literacy to inform the design and implementation of initiatives including HITS, PBL, wellbeing strategies, capturing student voice and wellbeing and engagement surveys.

Figure 23 outlines a selection of initiatives from Australian jurisdictions that could value-add to existing Queensland initiatives aimed at strengthening student engagement. However, it is noted that Junior Secondary–specific initiatives were not identified through the jurisdictional scan.

Northern Territory

Education Engagement Strategy (2022) describes four foundational elements of engagement: relationships; culture and identity; beliefs and motivation; and wellbeing and inclusion. They are established locally, informed by evidence, built in partnership with community and aligned to local values, contexts and strengths.

Australian Capital Territory

The *Engaging Schools Framework* supports schools to discuss their approach to engaging all students.

The *Ask us ... Student voice in the ACT resource kit* provides information, strategies and ideas for improving student voice in schools. It is flexible and adaptable to different school cultures and contexts and underpinned by guiding principles.

Western Australia

Engagement centres support the small percentage of students requiring intensive engagement and behaviour support.

South Australia

The *Public education purpose student forum* was a statewide conversation about the purpose of public education to inform the next *South Australian Public Education Statement of Purpose*. South Australian students shared their values and ideas for the future.

The voices of students, staff, families, the community and employers informed development of *Learn and Thrive: Our strategy for public education in South Australia*

Victoria

The pedagogical model supports schools to build teacher excellence and instructional leadership by stimulating discussions about current teaching practices, fostering a high-performance learning culture to improve student achievement and engagement.

The *Staying in Education dashboard* is an interactive online dashboard, developed to assist schools to identify students in Years 7 to 10 who are at risk of disengaging from school and leaving school early.

Amplify: Empowering Students through Voice, Agency and Leadership explains how schools can create conditions, employ practices and develop behaviours, attitudes and learning environments that are conducive to student voice, agency and leadership.

New South Wales

What Works Best: 2020 Update unpacks eight quality teaching practices that are known to support school improvement and enhance the learning outcomes of students. It is accompanied by the *What works best practice* guide.

Amplifying Student Voice through the School Excellence Cycle explains how identifying and planning for meaningful opportunities for student participation and leadership, voice and decision making are key to student wellbeing and school excellence.

Tasmania

Approach to Student Engagement articulates how student engagement can be strengthened through a focus on belonging and strong relationships, school culture, quality teaching for learning, and student voice and agency.

Figure 23: Australian jurisdictions – Student engagement initiatives that could value-add to existing Queensland initiatives

4.6 Opportunities for Junior Secondary: *On track for success* to support the implementation of strategies that strengthen student engagement

The research states:

Academically high-performing countries are more likely to seek formal feedback from students and are also more likely to act on student voice in schools (CESE 2016).

Opportunities

Embed practices in capability resources about how to create opportunities to hear and respond to student voices in classrooms.

The research states:

There are frameworks that can be used by systems, schools and teachers to foster and strengthen engagement (Corso et al. 2013; Reeves et al. 2023b).

Opportunities

▸ Build a system-wide shared understanding of student engagement frameworks.

▸ Develop a Junior Secondary conceptual framework that identifies the areas of focus for school improvement in Junior Secondary informed by research, consultation and system data.

▸ Co-design a reflection tool aligned to facilitate school improvement conversations.

The research states:

There is a range of evidence-based models of teaching and learning that can be implemented to engage all learners.

However, the characteristics of adolescent learner and effective learning environments need to be considered when differentiating these models, strategies and practices for Junior Secondary learners.

See the section titled: *Evidence-based models of teaching and learning that engage all learners*.

Opportunities

▸ Build teacher capability to:

› contextualise models of teaching and learning to engage Junior Secondary learners

› implement evidence-based strategies through a whole-school approach to pedagogy that recognises the specific needs of Junior Secondary learners.

▸ Share examples of how schools have successfully implemented evidence-based models of teaching and learning that engaged Junior Secondary learners, and the impact of the models implemented.

▸ Explore the possibilities for surfacing evidence-based practice and innovation in Junior Secondary.

The Queensland Department of Education scan highlights:

The Queensland Department of Education has a range of strategies and initiatives for strengthening student engagement.

Opportunities

▸ Collate relevant departmental resources, including examples of practice, in one location for schools and teachers.

▸ Explore the opportunities to bring a Junior Secondary lens to existing engagement initiatives.

▸ Build awareness of programs that are effective at promoting engagement and re-engagement for targeted groups of students.

The Australian jurisdictional scan highlights:

Student engagement is valued across the Australian jurisdictions.

However, there are no initiatives that explicitly meet the need of Junior Secondary learners.

Opportunities

Engage with each of the Australian jurisdictions identified as having unique student engagement initiatives, and explore if these can value-add or be contextualised for implementation in Queensland for Junior Secondary learners.

15 Based on Corso MJ, Bundick MJ, Quaglia RJ and Haywood DE (2013) 'Where student, teacher, and content meet: Student engagement in the secondary school classroom', *American Secondary Education*, 41(3):50–61, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43694167.

16 Fisher D, Frey N and Gonzalez A (2023) 4C's for better student engagement, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1 September 2023, 81(1), https://ascd.org/el/articles/4-cs-for-better-student-engagement?_hsmi=273416121&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-_J5DJNH2hqtGkmFg_f8GQAa_TSqNSMSJt1bGQDbpHwFF0MXV8V9mQv5MXcjvqkFg07j7KQnTRGhRtoxnIpVL56W4BS0w.

17 Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) (2023c) *Teaching for how students learn: A model of learning and teaching*, AERO, https://www.edresearch.edu.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/model-learning-teaching-aa_0.pdf.

18 University of Queensland (unpublished) *Supporting metacognition and self-regulated learning during the transition to high school*, University of Queensland, Australia.

19 Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) (2023a) *Introduction to multi-tiered systems of support*, AERO, https://www.edresearch.edu.au/sites/default/files/2023-04/aero-intro-to-mtss.pdf.

20 Based on Wormeli R (n.d.) *Middle school, not junior high*, Association for Middle Level Education, https://www.amle.org/middle-school-not-junior-high/.

21 Based on Caskey and Anfara (2007) and Brinegar and Caskey (2022). Caskey MM and Anfara VA Jr (2007) *Research summary: Young adolescents' developmental characteristics*, https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=ci_fac. Brinegar KM and Caskey M (2022) *Developmental characteristics of young adolescents: Research summary, Association for Middle Level Education*, https://www.amle.org/developmental-characteristics-of-young-adolescents/.

Strengthening student engagement through partnerships

Educating children is a responsibility shared among parents, teachers and the wider community. It is the responsibility of all adults to help children develop the skills they need to shape the future … When the community is also involved in children's education, children can learn about the opportunities for their future and also how to be engaged, responsible citizens, while the community can learn about the needs, concerns and views of its younger members.

OECD 2019, p8

5.1 Strengthening student engagement through partnerships is anchored in the SIT and AITSL standards
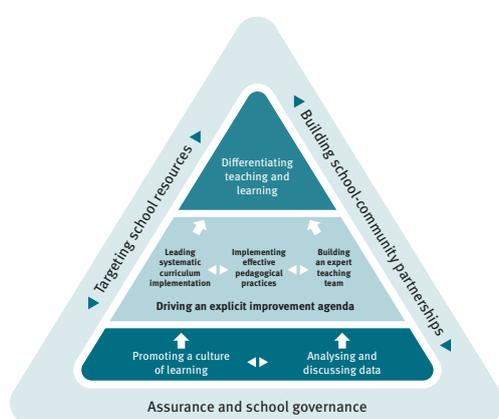
The SIT describes school leader and teacher actions that are focused on building school–community partnerships. These actions include:

▸ **promoting a culture of learning** by ensuring 'families are viewed as integral members of the school community and partners in student learning' (ACER 2023, p6)

▸ **building school–community partnerships** by actively seeking 'ways to build a strong connection with [the] local and wider community to enhance student learning, engagement, wellbeing and opportunity. Partnerships with a range of stakeholders including education and training institutions, businesses, and community organisations are strategically established to address identified student needs … Families are recognised as integral members of the school community and partners in their child's education' (ACER 2023, p18).

The AITSL standards describe how strengthening student engagement through partnerships is a shared responsibility among principals, middle leaders and teachers, who are tasked with:

▸ **engaging and working with the community:** 'principals embrace inclusion and help build a culture of high expectations that takes account of the richness and diversity of the wider school community and the education systems and sectors. They develop and maintain positive partnerships with students, families and carers and all those associated with the wider school community' (AITSL 2019, p18)

▸ **managing effectively:** middle leaders build 'productive relationships with students, parents/carers and the community to enhance student learning and wellbeing' (AITSL 2024, p24)

▸ **engaging professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community:** teachers 'understand strategies for working effectively, sensitively and confidentially with parents/carers … [and] the role of external professionals and community representatives in broadening teachers' professional knowledge and practice' (AITSL 2022a, p22).

5.2 Literature scan:
Strengthening student engagement through partnerships

The three dimensions of engagement (behavioural, emotional and cognitive) and the role of schools in promoting each dimension were explored in Part 4 Strategies for strengthening student engagement. However, schools do not work in isolation; their partnerships across the community can be leveraged to meet strategic improvement priorities. As such, effective partnerships can contribute to all three dimensions of engagement. Effective partnerships enhance:

▸ cognitive engagement, by incorporating authentic, real-world contexts into learning experiences and activities, making learning relevant to students' lives and experiences

▸ emotional engagement, by providing opportunities for students to feel connected and develop positive relationships and a sense of belonging to a larger network that supports their growth

▸ behavioural engagement, through adults modelling appropriate behaviours and providing meaningful learning goals by teaching students valuable life skills.

> 'Learning is a partnership with parents, carers and others in the community, all of whom have a role to play in nurturing the love of learning needed for success at school and in life.'
> Education Services Australia 2019, p3

The *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Education Services Australia 2019) sets the challenge of supporting young Australians to be 'confident and creative individuals who understand their responsibilities as global citizens and know how to affect positive change' (p6). This can be achieved through the creation of partnerships that connect students with community, industry and business while supporting their wellbeing. 'These connections and associations can facilitate development, training and employment opportunities, promote a sense of responsible citizenship and encourage lifelong learning' (p10).

Understanding the significant role that parents/caregivers and communities play in the success students experience at school 'is of paramount importance and begins with pre-service teacher education and continues through professional development within the schools, and beyond through collaborative efforts with families and communities' (Molina 2013, p236).

School–parent/caregiver partnerships

Parents/caregivers are a child's first educators. They are the 'most important educational influence in a child's life … It is critical for the education community to work in partnership with parents, carers and families to support a child's progress through … school' (Education Services Australia 2019, p10). Parent/caregiver involvement in middle school is positively associated with achievement; moreover, parental engagement in children's learning is a bigger predictor of children's success in school than a family's socio-economic background (OECD 2023). The learning-from-home challenges faced by schools during the digital disruption of 2020 further highlighted the important role that parents/caregivers play in their child's education.

However, there is a normal shift in parent–child relationships during the middle years, and this should be seen as an opportunity. Stronger parent engagement in learning and parent–child communication supports a student's personal development, reduces risky behaviours and leads to fewer mental health problems (Ramsay et al. 2020).

> 'Building school-community partnerships … can provide students with better opportunities to succeed. Studies show these partnerships can lead to social and emotional skills development … enhanced student engagement … [and] improved academic outcomes.'
> Sepanik and Brown 2021, p3

Goodall and Montgomery (2014) propose that there is a progression from parental *involvement with schools* to parental *engagement with their student's learning*. This progression 'represents a shift in emphasis, away from the relationship between parents and schools, towards a focus on the relationship between parents and their children's learning … a move from information giving (on the part of schools) to a sharing of information between parents and schools' (p403). This is characterised by joint decision-making between parents, students and schools and results in 'a more equitable distribution of agency with regard to children's learning' (p403).

Promoting parent/caregiver involvement in their children's transition from primary school to high school can result in a smoother experience for students (CESE 2017b). This might also support the shift towards parental engagement and agency.

School–community partnerships

School–community partnerships are a key factor in a 21st-century approach to education. These partnerships can assist teachers to develop teaching and learning programs that are based on authentic knowledge building and action-oriented experiences (DePetris and Eames 2017).

The Australian Government (Department of Education) (2021) positions the education of young people as being 'the responsibility of the entire community, not just schools'. 'Community' can include industry, businesses, local government agencies and tertiary education organisations. The purposes for partnerships between schools and communities are varied, and can include supporting students, supporting school leadership or supporting teacher development.

> 'Partnerships can lead to better morale among teachers and the better use of resources within schools, leading to improved education outcomes for young people. Business can also experience improved staff morale, better awareness of their industry and community recognition.'
>
> Australian Government (DoE) 2021

Successful school–community partnerships share similar characteristics. An outcome of the *2011 Business–School Connections Roundtable* was the recommendation to develop principles (see Figure 24) that underpin the establishment of effective and sustainable school–community partnerships, providing general guidance to schools and businesses for establishing these relationships (Australian Government (Department of Education) 2013).
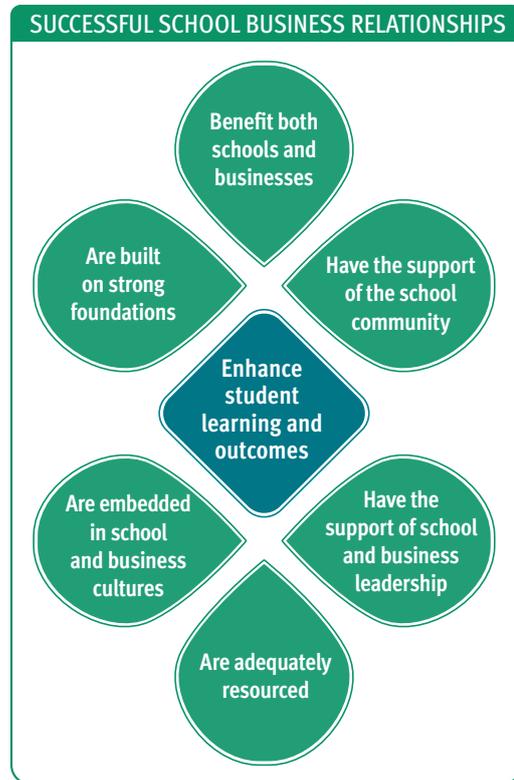

SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

- Benefit both schools and businesses
- Are built on strong foundations
- Have the support of the school community
- Enhance student learning and outcomes
- Are embedded in school and business cultures
- Have the support of school and business leadership
- Are adequately resourced

Figure 24: Guiding principles for school–business relationships[22]

These principles were confirmed through a collaborative research project between the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and the Queensland Department of Education, which developed seven principles to guide school clusters to establish science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) school–community partnerships (see Figure 25). The points of difference between the two sets of principles are that the Queensland Department of Education guiding principles emphasise all partners must be active in the partnership, and the effectiveness of the partnership is improved through a process of evaluation.
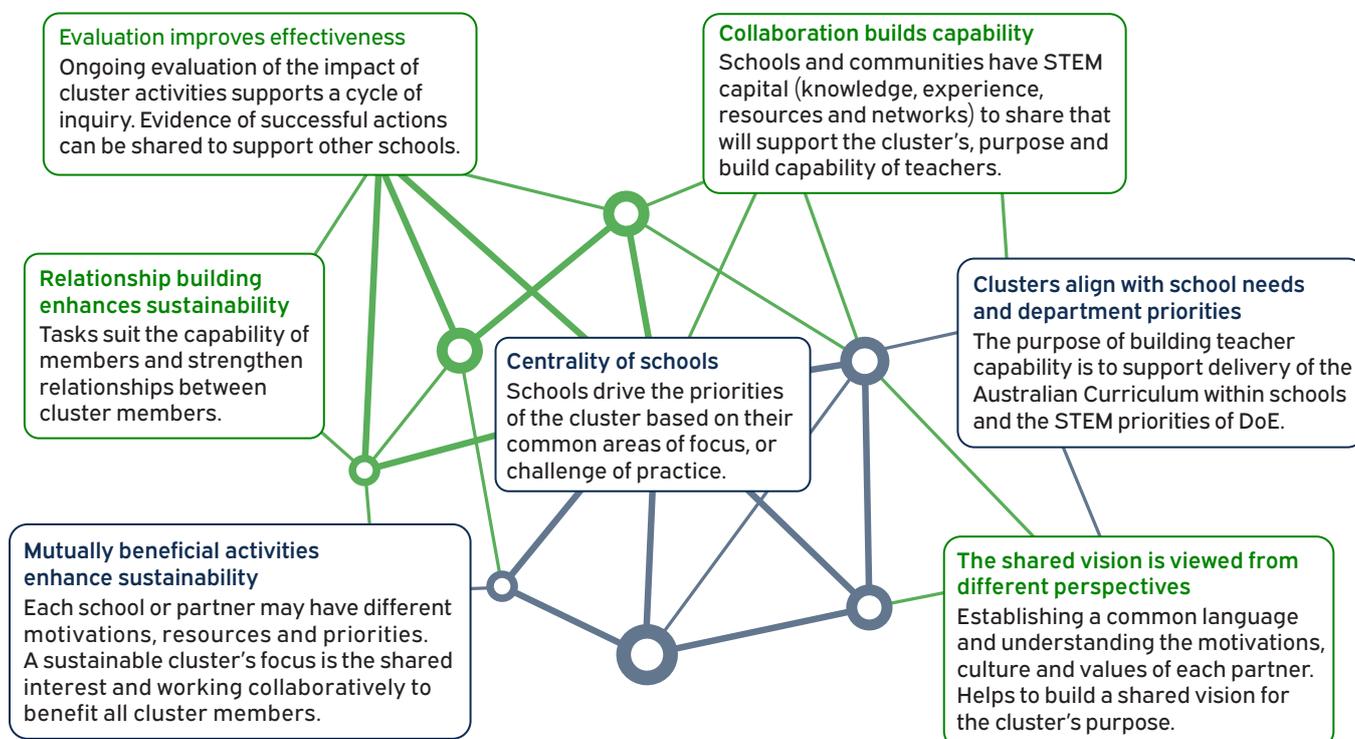

Evaluation improves effectiveness
Ongoing evaluation of the impact of cluster activities supports a cycle of inquiry. Evidence of successful actions can be shared to support other schools.

Collaboration builds capability
Schools and communities have STEM capital (knowledge, experience, resources and networks) to share that will support the cluster's purpose and build capability of teachers.

Relationship building enhances sustainability
Tasks suit the capability of members and strengthen relationships between cluster members.

Centrality of schools
Schools drive the priorities of the cluster based on their common areas of focus, or challenge of practice.

Clusters align with school needs and department priorities
The purpose of building teacher capability is to support delivery of the Australian Curriculum within schools and the STEM priorities of DoE.

Mutually beneficial activities enhance sustainability
Each school or partner may have different motivations, resources and priorities. A sustainable cluster's focus is the shared interest and working collaboratively to benefit all cluster members.

The shared vision is viewed from different perspectives
Establishing a common language and understanding the motivations, culture and values of each partner. Helps to build a shared vision for the cluster's purpose.

Figure 25: Seven guiding principles to establish STEM school–community partnerships[23]

As outlined in Part 4 Strategies for strengthening student engagement, school and teacher professional practice can be supported through school clusters. A Queensland trial of 45 schools used the seven guiding principles when establishing professional learning communities to build teacher capability in STEM. The *STEM Cluster Tool*, a framework embedded within the school context, supported the trial schools to make informed decisions about setting up, maintaining and evaluating partnerships with external STEM organisations that address a common problem of practice and lead to improved student outcomes (State of Queensland (Department of Education) 2019).

The feedback from the trial schools was overwhelmingly positive and participants agreed that the tool, together with the guiding principles, supported decision making. This feedback provides the authorising environment for the development of frameworks and accompanying tools to support individual schools or clusters of schools to establish effective school–community partnerships for all contexts, not just STEM.

Primary school and high school partnerships

The partnership that exists 'between secondary schools and feeder primary schools is an important factor in the transition between primary and secondary school' (CESE 2017b, p5). Examples of strategies that can strengthen this partnership and result in a positive transition experience for students include teachers from upper primary and Junior Secondary collaborating to:

▸ align teaching and learning programs and assessment practices

▸ attend joint professional learning about learners, the curriculum and learning

▸ share student learning and wellbeing information

▸ develop peer support relationships through senior primary students engaging with their junior secondary counterparts

▸ provide parents with information and resources about their child's transition to high school

▸ encourage continued parent involvement in their child's education.

5.3 Queensland Department of Education partnerships data

The department values partnerships with parents and community because engagement through learning partnerships has been shown to improve student outcomes, strengthen community relationships and build cohesion.

Quantitative evidence about partnerships in state schools is gathered through the SOS, while qualitative evidence is gathered through the school review process.

Evidence from the School Opinion Survey

Background considerations for the SOS were outlined in Part 1 Junior Secondary in the Queensland context. When interpreting the data from the SOS it is important to take a variety of factors into consideration, such as the local context, the influence of social media users expressing opinions about education, greater societal views on education and current national and state education policy.

From 2015 to 2019 and 2021 to 2023, parents/caregivers were asked to indicate their agreement with seven partnerships statements.

SOS state reports show agreement was consistent within each time series; however, there has been a slight decline in agreement for all statements, since the 2015 to 2019 time series (see Figure 26). Of most significance is the decline in parent/caregiver agreement to the statements:

▸ This school asks for my input
(5.2 percentage points decrease).

▸ This school takes parents' opinions seriously
(6.7 percentage points decrease).

From 2021, the SOS for staff included the statement: *This school encourages parents/carers to be active partners in educating their child*. Agreement to this statement remained consistent from 2021 to 2023, with an agreement of 92.1% in 2023.

It appears that since the digital disruption, parents/caregivers feel their opinions are less valued by schools; however, school staff perceive schools do encourage active partnerships with parents. This could be because of:

▸ parental expectations of involvement in their child's learning remain high after the learning from home initiative of 2020

▸ individual experiences with education

▸ the influence of the media, including social media users expressing opinions about parental involvement in their child's education.

Percentage of parent/caregiver agreement with SOS statements

■ 2015 parents/caregivers   ■ 2023 parents/caregivers

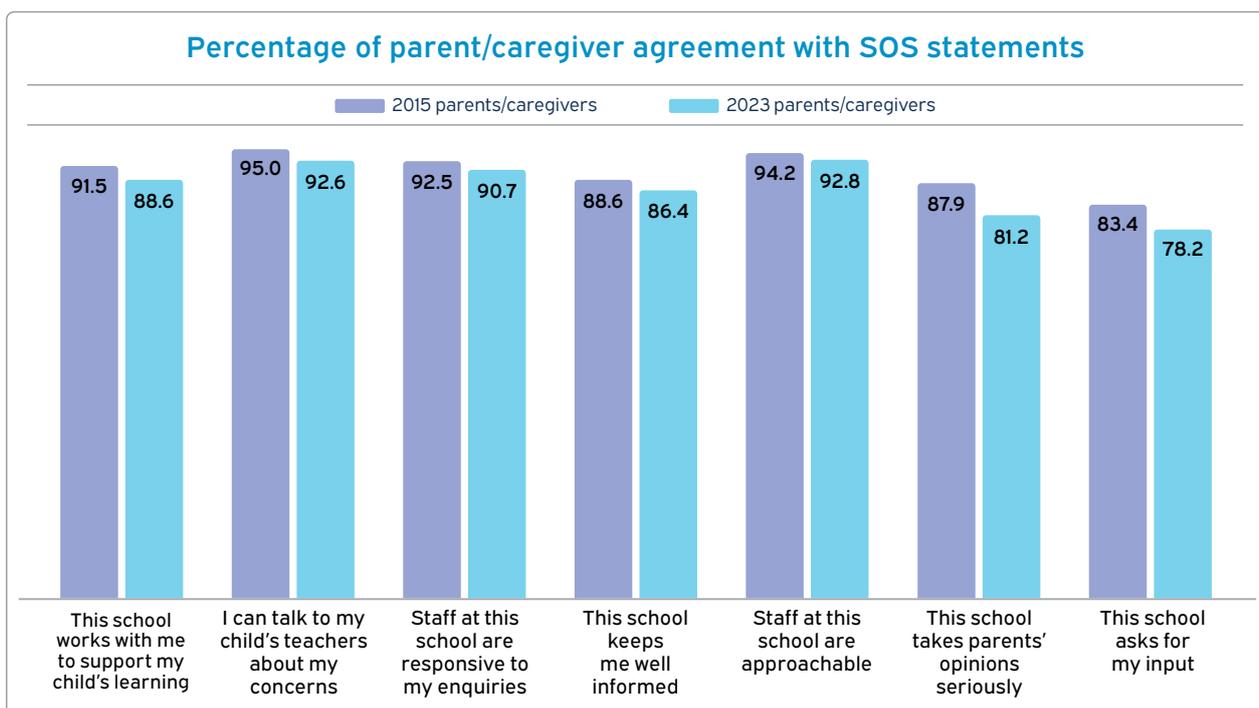| Statement	2015	2023
This school works with me to support my child's learning	91.5	88.6
I can talk to my child's teachers about my concerns	95.0	92.6
Staff at this school are responsive to my enquiries	92.5	90.7
This school keeps me well informed	88.6	86.4
Staff at this school are approachable	94.2	92.8
This school takes parents' opinions seriously	87.9	81.2
This school asks for my input	83.4	78.2

Figure 26

Evidence from school reviews

School reviews show Queensland state schools are building school–parent/caregiver and school–community partnerships. The review process is informed by the SIT and supports schools to reflect on current practice and prioritise areas of focus. Reviewers are not specifically focusing on improvement strategies for Junior Secondary and improvement strategies are contextualised to each school's improvement journey.

Themes within the recommendations given to P–10, P–12 and secondary schools for strengthening partnerships and community engagement include:

▸ collaborating with parents to foster participation and increased voice for an authentic partnership in their child's education and to enhance community pride and sense of belonging

▸ consulting with students, parents and the broader community to collaboratively review junior curriculum offerings and learning opportunities to enable students' transition to viable Senior Secondary and post-school pathways

▸ creating opportunities for staff to engage with primary school colleagues to strengthen curriculum and pedagogy alignment and sharing of resources and information, thereby supporting the successful transition of students to secondary school

▸ leveraging partnerships for improving student engagement

▸ collaborating with primary schools in local clusters to develop common approaches in the areas of literacy, attendance and behaviour management

▸ enacting processes to identify, document and review local community partnerships that align with school priorities and improve student learning, wellbeing and engagement outcomes

▸ strengthening engagement with staff, students, parents and local First Nations community members to progress embedding of First Nations perspectives in the school and support the learning, engagement and wellbeing outcomes of all students.

5.4 Queensland Department of Education initiatives for strengthening partnerships

Affirmed by the research, the department values and 'recognises the integral role parents and families play as partners in their children's education. Our state schools play a critical role in supporting this diversity, engaging with the community, and modelling and fostering respectful relationships between learners and all members of the school … Schools and teachers that take the time to establish and strengthen effective relationships with parents and the community are finding that their efforts are being rewarded through improved outcomes for students and improved job satisfaction for teachers' (Queensland Government (Department of Education) n.d.a, p2)

Figure 27 highlights strategies and initiatives being implemented by the department to establish and strengthen meaningful and effective partnerships with parents/caregivers, industry, employers, universities, organisations and government to support students to realise their potential.

 Engaging communities: Empowering futures provides a framework for engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

 The Partnership Initiative is a system response to improving learning and life outcomes for children and students living in Queensland's most socio-educationally disadvantaged communities through locally responsive, flexible, integrated and tailored strategies co-designed with the community.

 Educational precincts are geographically located groups of schools who bring together local, cross-sector and cross-government partners' expertise to work collaboratively in a structured and supported way, and benefit from shared access to resources and flexible, co-designed approaches to lifting outcomes in their communities.

 The Parent and Community Engagement Framework uses current evidence and best practice to provide a model that supports schools to enhance parent and community engagement, thereby maximising student learning and wellbeing.

 Student, Child and Family Connect supports vulnerable students and families to access multi-agency support to remain engaged in education. Student, parent/caregiver and family voices will be valued during decision making at all levels.

 The Every Day Counts initiative aims to assist in improving student attendance at school through a shared commitment by students, parents, caregivers, schools and the community.

 STEM partnerships between schools and industry, higher education, research organisations and community organisations provide students and teachers with real-world contexts for learning. Partnerships enhance the significance of STEM learning for students.

 The Pathways to a Successful Future Hub is a central platform that draws together evidence-informed career development ideas and examples of school practice across the phases of schooling and professional learning for schools.
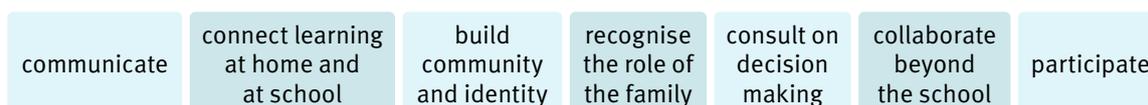
 Regional School Industry Partnership (RSIP) program is a Department of Education commitment to the *Good people. Good jobs — Queensland Workforce Strategy 2022–2032*. RSIP managers in regions work to strengthen school–industry partnerships and support school-to-work transitions.

Figure 27: Queensland Department of Education partnership initiatives

5.5 Jurisdictional scan: Strategies for strengthening partnerships

Australian Government

The Australian Government supports and promotes parental engagement through the *Family-School Partnerships Framework* (2020). It identifies seven dimensions for planning partnerships and provides strategies that can support school communities to build and improve family–school partnerships and to complement the work already being done in schools. The seven dimensions are:

communicate	connect learning at home and at school	build community and identity	recognise the role of the family	consult on decision making	collaborate beyond the school	participate

For each key dimension, example strategies provide practical guidance and complement the work already being done in schools to build and improve family–school partnerships.

Australian states and territories

A scan of Australian state and territory education websites indicates that all jurisdictions value partnerships with parents/carers and community. In many cases there are resources, case studies and examples of effective practice to help build these partnerships.

Figure 28 outlines a selection of established initiatives that could value-add to existing Queensland initiatives, advice and resources; it does not include initiatives that are already being implemented in Queensland such as strategic plans, parent and engagement frameworks and STEM industry partnerships strategies.

Western Australia

The Engaging and Working with Your Community Framework is a resource for principals to use with their school community to build partnerships that are appropriate to school context, including family and community characteristics, school size and student needs.

South Australia

Local Partnerships: South Australian Government Schools and Preschools is a model that geographically groups all preschools and school sites, and the communities they serve. The goal is to work together to develop a self-improving school system that makes better use of available resources to benefit students.

Tasmania

Together with Families: Building a Culture Where Family Engagement Is Everyone's Business provides shared expectations for working with families for all Department of Education employees. It is underpinned by values and engagement principles.

Victoria

The *Strategic Partnerships Program* enhances learning experiences by funding programs offered by not-for-profit organisations that will enhance learning experiences, improve student outcomes and build teacher capability.

A Toolkit for Transition Clusters: Primary to Secondary supports clusters of schools to develop a primary to secondary school transition strategy.

New South Wales

The NSW Parents and Citizens' Federation established a Parent voice community to enable parents/caregivers to discuss their children's education and wellbeing directly with the NSW Department of Education.

The *Parent Partnerships Learning Ecosystems Program (2022)* supported schools to foster mutually beneficial partnerships to enhance student outcomes.

Australian Capital Territory

The *Progressing Parental Engagement in the ACT* project values parents as students' first teachers. Evidence-informed resources provide schools and families with effective strategies and tips for strengthening school–family partnerships.

Figure 28: Australian jurisdictions' partnership initiatives that could value-add to existing Queensland initiatives

5.6 Opportunities for Junior Secondary: *On track for success* to strengthen student engagement through partnerships

The evidence states:

Since the digital disruption, parents/caregivers feel their opinions are not as valued by schools. However, school staff perceive that schools encourage active partnerships with parents.

Opportunities:

▸ Build the capability of school staff to:
  › investigate local reasons for any decline in parents feeling their opinions are valued
  › strengthen their communication and engagement with parents/caregivers.
▸ Share examples of how schools have successfully valued the opinions of parents/caregivers and staff, particularly in a Junior Secondary context, and the impact of the strategies implemented.

The evidence states:

Queensland state schools are building school–family and school–community partnerships. However, an understanding of the impact of effective partnerships on Junior Secondary engagement is not well evidenced.

Opportunities:

▸ Support schools to reflect on opportunities to build partnerships through their strategic planning.
▸ Collaborate with the School Region and Reviews team to:
  › enhance reviewer understanding of emerging advice and resources for meeting the needs of Junior Secondary learners
  › understand how schools are strengthening Junior Secondary engagement through partnerships.
▸ Collect evidence of the impact of effective school–parent/caregiver and school–community partnerships on Junior Secondary student engagement.

The research and evidence states:

The progression from parental *involvement with schools* to parental *engagement with their student's learning* represents a change in relational agency (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

This is supported by the SOS data, suggesting the system is not responsive to this progression.

Opportunities:

Explore how the *Parental involvement to parental engagement continuum* (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014) could be used in Queensland state schools to support school–parent/caregiver partnerships.

The research states:

The transition from primary to high school can be smoother for students if schools promote parent/carer involvement.

School review recommendations suggest leveraging partnerships for the transition from primary school to high school (CESE 2017b).

Opportunities:

Support primary and high schools to reflect on opportunities to build partnerships that support student transitions.

The research states:

Teachers' understanding of the role partnerships play in improved outcomes for students begins with initial teacher education (Molina 2013).

Opportunities:

▸ Understand how initial teacher education courses embed:
  › the importance of strengthening student engagement through partnerships
  › strategies that specifically cater to Junior Secondary learners.

The research states:

School clusters can leverage effective external STEM partnerships to improve student outcomes (State of Queensland (Department of Education) 2019).

Opportunities:

▸ Explore how the *STEM Cluster Tool* and the *Seven principles guiding cluster activity to establish school-community partnerships* can be used by schools for contexts outside STEM to improve student outcomes in Junior Secondary.

▸ Share examples of how schools have established effective partnerships to improve Junior Secondary learner outcomes.

The Queensland Department of Education scan highlights:

The department has a range of strategies and initiatives for building and maintaining partnerships.

Opportunities:

▸ Collate relevant departmental partnership resources, including examples of practice, in one location for schools and teachers.

▸ Establish mechanisms for communicating with internal teams to avoid duplication and to ensure consistent messaging and ongoing conversations.

The Australian jurisdictional scan highlights:

Partnerships are valued across the Australian jurisdictions and play a role in enhancing student learning.

However, there are no partnership initiatives that explicitly meet the needs of Junior Secondary learners.

Opportunities

Engage with each of the Australian jurisdictions identified as having unique partnership initiatives, and explore if these can value-add or be contextualised for implementation in Queensland for Junior Secondary learners.

22 Australian Government (Department of Education) (2013) *Guiding Principles for School-Business Relationships*, Australian Government, https://www.education.gov.au/school-work-transitions/resources/
23 State of Queensland (Department of Education) (2019) *Review of STEM education in Queensland state schools 2015–2017: Final report 2018*, State of Queensland (Department of Education), https://education.qld.gov.au/curriculums/Documents/review-of-stem-education-queensland-state-schools.PDF, p17.

Year 10 consolidation and transition

'Achieving educational excellence in Australian schools will require a focus on … learning growth for all students, complemented by policies which support an adaptive, innovative and continuously improving education system.'

Australian Government (Department of Education) 2018, p13

The synthesis of evidence indicates that responsive education delivery involves meeting students where they are, and supporting them to be on a meaningful pathway.

The department's Education Strategy sets a clear vision for a progressive, high-performing education system for Queensland state schools. This vision aligns with the priorities presented in *Through growth to achievement: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools* (Australian Government (Department of Education) 2018), which include:

Having the **common goal** that every student achieves at least one year of learning growth each year.	Supporting staff and student **wellbeing and engagement** to establish a strong foundation for learning outcomes.	Supporting every child and student to be **healthy, resilient and confident** individuals as they create their future.	Supporting systemic **improvement through actions** that will strengthen educational performance.

Year 10 students are adolescents

The term 'adolescent' was defined in Part 1 Junior Secondary in the Queensland context, as 'young people in the transition from childhood to adulthood, not exclusively in Years 7–9'. Year 10 students are adolescents who are transitioning from childhood to adulthood and the neuroscience, approaches, practices and principles about engaging adolescent learners described throughout this paper also apply to these students.

Supporting students during the transition from Year 10 to Year 11 is equally as important as supporting students through the primary school to secondary school transition. This requires the continuation of intentional approaches 'to

teaching and learning that is responsive and appropriate to the full range of needs, interests and achievements of young adolescents' (Adolescent Success 2019). Recognising and understanding adolescent developmental characteristics and their relationship to curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices remains important for students in Year 10. Similarly, as older adolescent learners, Year 11 and Year 12 students deserve intentional decision making about age-appropriate teaching, learning and assessment; however, this is out of scope for this paper. It is acknowledged that a deep understanding of this phase of learning is important when examining the role of Year 10 as a year of learning, consolidation and transition.

Year 10 in state schools prior to the Australian Curriculum

The purpose and structure of Year 11 and Year 12 in Queensland and the pathways options for these students have historically been articulated more clearly than for Year 10.

Before the provision of the Foundation–Year 10 Australian Curriculum, the intended curriculum for Queensland state schools was specified in the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines, Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework* Essential Learnings, and in Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) senior syllabuses and nationally endorsed training packages and nationally accredited vocational education and training courses. It also included developing the capabilities and values of students to be active and responsible citizens. These requirements were the core of learning programs that could be supplemented with other learning as determined by the school and teacher (Queensland Government (Department of Education, Training and the Arts [DETA]) 2008).

The *P–12 Curriculum Framework for Queensland State Schools* (P–12 Curriculum Framework, published in 2008) (see Figure 29) was an 'over-arching framework that capture[ed] all curriculum requirements from Prep to Year 12' (DETA 2008, p15) (The *K–12 Framework* was published in 2024). It positioned Year 10 'as a foundation year of the Senior Phase of Learning to consolidate the knowledge, skills and capabilities that are necessary for successful learning in Years 11 and 12' (p4) and required every Year 10 student to undertake Senior Education and Training (SET) planning.

The Year 10 curriculum void gave rise in 2009 to the QSA Year 10 Guidelines. These guidelines provided practical information and advice supporting schools to develop teaching and learning programs that bridge the transition from Year 9 to senior schooling by establishing a pathway from the Years 1–9 Essential Learnings to the Years 11–12 senior syllabuses (QSA n.d.). The Year 10 Guidelines were underpinned by four guiding principles (QSA n.d. p1):

▸ Foundation
The Guidelines establish the foundation for young people to make decisions about their choices in Years 11 to 12, and to provide a solid base for the knowledge and understanding and the ways of working needed for the senior subjects.

▸ Continuity
The Guidelines maintain the focus on the capabilities that students need to work with knowledge, to grow and manage themselves, and to become active participants in local and global contexts.

▸ Transition
The Guidelines help schools support students in dealing with the increased expectations to take greater responsibility for their learning, participate in leadership and community activities, and engage with the greater complexity of more disciplinary-based or technical subjects.

▸ Alignment
The Guidelines provide advice about assessing students' achievements in meaningful ways and using assessment to promote improved learning.
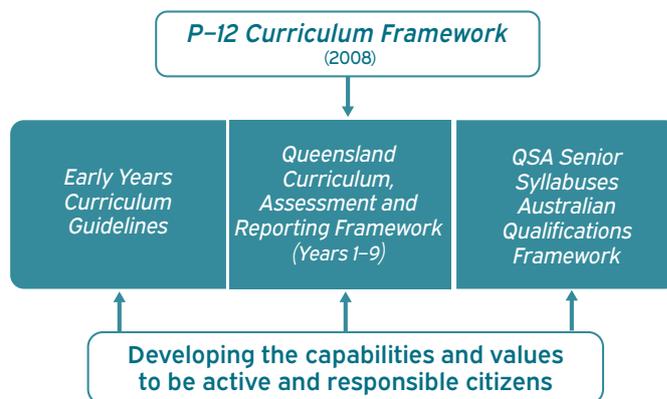
Figure 29: P–12 Curriculum Framework for Queensland State Schools(2008)[24]

Learning accounts in Year 10

In the current Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) system, learning accounts are opened by schools in the 12 months before a student turns 16 or in the 12 months before they complete Year 10. Learning accounts are used to record enrolments and results for all studies that contribute to a QCE or Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement (QCIA) (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority [QCAA] n.d.a). Student account requirements are detailed in the *Education (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority) Act 2014*.

All Queensland state school students develop a SET Plan in Year 10, in partnership with their parents or carers. The SET Plan maps out a plan of action for the student to remain on track to succeed in senior secondary, post-school education and work. As part of the SET planning process, students identify their intended learning option for the compulsory participation phase; for students completing Years 11 and 12, this will include a pathway to be eligible to obtain a QCE or QCIA. To receive a QCE, students must achieve:

a set amount of learning	at the set standard	in a set pattern	while meeting literacy and numeracy requirements
20 credits from contributing courses of study (QCAA-developed subjects or courses, vocational education and training (VET) qualifications and other QCE-recognised courses).	Satisfactory completion, grade of C or better, competency or qualification completion, pass or equivalent.	12 credits from completed Core courses and 8 credits from any combination of Core, Preparatory (maximum of 4) and Complementary (maximum of 8) courses.	

(QCAA n.d.b)

It is possible for a student to continue working towards their QCE post-school should they not meet the requirements by the time they have finished school.

Year 10 in the context of the Australian Curriculum

Currently, Queensland state schools are required to provide (teach, assess and report) the Australian Curriculum Prep to Year 10.

A scan of the Australian states' and territories' public-facing education websites reveals that, like Queensland, the Northern Territory describes stages of schooling, and positions Year 10 as part of the senior stage of schooling (Northern Territory Government 2024). All jurisdictions deliver the Australian Curriculum, or state-based curriculum informed by the Australian Curriculum, to students in Year 10.

The *K–12 Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework* (K–12 Framework) (Queensland Government (Department of Education) 2024) acknowledges that 'Year 10 marks a phase of consolidation and transition into Years 11 and 12. During Year 10, schools help students to recognise and build on their strengths and interests to help them make informed decisions about their future pathways ...'. The best preparation for success in the QCE system is to teach, assess and report on the Prep to Year 10 Australian Curriculum prior to the commencement of senior studies. Success in senior secondary is dependent on the academic, social and personal learning undertaken in junior secondary' (p49).

Consequently, the Year 10 Australian Curriculum sets a strong foundation of knowledge, skills, understandings and learning dispositions for students to transition successfully into Years 11 and 12, whatever their pathway. It is important for principals, middle leaders and teachers to understand the connections and continuities between the Australian Curriculum and the range of pathways (see Figure 30) while still valuing the notion of a years' worth of learning.

'Australian students should receive a world-class school education, tailored to individual learning needs, and relevant to a fast-changing world. They should be challenged and supported to progress and excel in learning in every year of school, appropriate to each student's starting point and capabilities.'

Australian Government (DoE) 2018, pviii

- QCAA General syllabuses
- QCAA Applied syllabuses
- QCAA Short courses
- Vocational Education and Training
- TAFE or university subjects
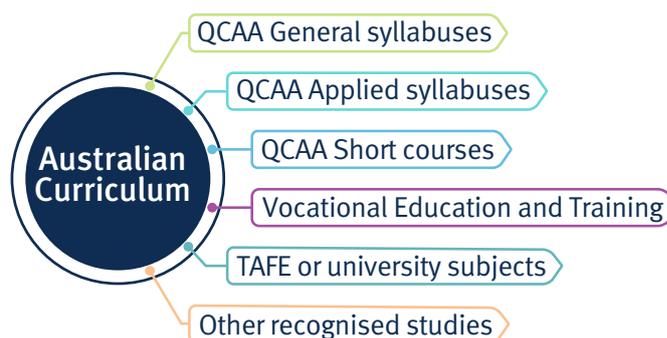- Other recognised studies

Australian Curriculum

Figure 30: Curriculum pathways

Year 10 can provide the opportunity for students to begin to focus on areas of specialisation related both to their future schooling and to intended pathways beyond school. However, the Australian Curriculum outlines a four-year program from Year 7 to 10. Condensing this learning into three years potentially compromises students' learning experience and developmental preparedness as the formative and foundation years for adolescence are still underway in Year 10.

The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Version 4.0 (ACARA 2012) outlines the propositions upon which the Australian Curriculum was built. The propositions include that the curriculum:

▸ is established on a strong evidence base related to learning, pedagogy and what works in professional practice

▸ is presented as a continuum of learning that makes clear to teachers what is to be taught across the years of schooling and makes clear what students should learn and the quality of learning expected of them as they progress through school

▸ recognises the entitlement of each student to knowledge, understanding and skills that provide a foundation for successful and lifelong learning and participation in the Australian community

▸ builds firm and meaningful foundation skills as well as providing the basis for developing expertise for the increasing number of students who move on to specialised advanced studies in academic disciplines, professions and technical trades

▸ has an evidence base for learning, pedagogy and effective professional practice.

Year 10 in the context of the QCE system

An unintended consequence of the introduction of the QCE system in 2019 (with Year 11 students) was the school approach of introducing Senior Secondary syllabus content, assessment practices and subject prerequisites into Year 10, as a strategy for preparing students for success in Years 11 and 12. In some contexts, this practice has persisted from the Year 10 Guidelines despite the introduction of the Foundation–Year 10 Australian Curriculum.

These practices are in part precipitated by the design of the QCAA senior syllabuses which contain four units with a notional time of 55 hours of teaching and learning, including assessment. However, teaching time is significantly reduced in Semester 2 of Year 12 due to the scheduling of external examinations, and schools may feel the need to commence course work in Year 10 as a strategy to ensure students are prepared by the time they enter Year 12. Whilst the QCAA outlines various approaches to flexible delivery and considerations for principals who might wish to implement these strategies, it is not necessarily appropriate to routinely implement these strategies for whole cohorts. Consideration should be given to 'providing students with all learning from the P–10 Australian Curriculum to ensure they have covered the foundational knowledge and skills required within senior syllabus documents [and the] nature, ability, maturity, social needs and wellbeing of the student/s'. (QCAA 2024)

The legislated requirement to open a learning account in the 12 months before a student completes Year 10 has led to the practice of some schools enrolling entire cohorts of Year 10 students in QCAA courses or VET qualifications to enable them to 'bank' credits towards their QCE. Pragmatically, this provides students with a safety net should they not satisfactorily complete a core course. The QCE system is high-stakes, and this strategy is one way of minimising the risk that students will not meet the requirements. However, this practice may mean that students are not accessing the Australian Curriculum.

Strategies that compress or omit the Year 10 Australian Curriculum or introduce senior subjects into Year 10 while intending to cater for a range of pathways risk undermining the notion of entitlement and employing strategies that are not age and learner appropriate. At this stage, no evidence indicates that these strategies are an effective preparation for the senior phase. Consequently, the *Building Student Success in Years 7 to 10 to Support Transition to Years 11 and 12 Reflection Tool* was developed to facilitate professional conversations that assist school communities to build a shared understanding about effective curriculum and assessment from Years 7 to 10.

> 'Supporting transitions between primary and lower secondary education as well as between lower and upper secondary education can improve educational attainment, chances in the labour market, and social inclusion.'
>
> OECD 2023

Next steps

There is no systematic evidence-based approach to the implementation of Year 10 across Queensland state schools. While the K–12 Framework provides policy on Prep to Year 10, the department's Education Strategy positions Year 10 within the 'Ready for the future' school priority. The challenge is finding the balance between flexible approaches to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum that meet the needs of Year 10 students, their entitlement to the whole curriculum, and maintaining whole-of-system integrity, equity, alignment and accountability.

Schools are committed to the principles of foundation, continuity, transition and alignment that underpin the Year 10 Guidelines, but there is not a system-wide shared understanding of what these mean in the context of a P–10 curriculum.

Moving forward, there is a need for an intentional approach to the teaching of the Australian Curriculum that is responsive and appropriate for the full range of Year 10 students' needs, interests and pathways.

Irrespective of whether Year 10 is positioned as Junior Secondary or Senior Secondary, what matters most is that Year 10 students are engaged in teaching, learning and assessment practices that are appropriate for them as adolescent learners transitioning to Years 11 and 12 and their chosen pathway. Supporting each student on meaningful pathways to success is a shared responsibility. Balancing high expectations and personal interests while developing dispositions such as resilience and flexibility can support students to be open to the range of possibilities for their future.

Possible next steps for the system include:

▸ investigating evidence of the effectiveness of the variety of approaches to Year 10

▸ recognising and responding to the range of pathway options and needs of all Year 10 learners

▸ clarifying the purpose and policy position of Year 10 in Queensland state schools.

24 Queensland Government (Department of Education, Training and the Arts) (2008) *P–12 Curriculum Framework*

Conclusion

Almost a decade on from the *Flying Start* initiative, system data on Junior Secondary learners shows:

- marked increase in the number of suspensions
- decrease in attendance as students transition from primary school into Junior Secondary, and from Junior Secondary to Senior Secondary
- decrease in student agreement about:
  - their interest in schoolwork
  - being able to talk to their teachers about their concerns
  - teacher interest in their wellbeing
  - feeling safe at school
  - having their opinions being taken seriously
  - the management of student behaviour at school.

However, understandings of the adolescent learner in the fields of psychology, education and neuroscience have progressed. Advances in neuroscience have identified a 'second window of opportunity' during adolescence when the brain undergoes a second rapid phase of change as experience and environment combine with genetics to shape the brain. It is the responsibility of educators to support and provide experiences for students to build neural pathways and behavioural patterns that will set them up for success. This is a pivotal time in which to influence students' identity, future behaviour patterns, self-regulation and self-awareness before the window closes.

Because the context within which Junior Secondary students are learning today is different to that of *Flying Start*, the system's approach to supporting Junior Secondary learners needs to adapt and evolve with their changing needs. If students experience positive learning experiences supported by parents, trusted adults, schools and communities, there can be a shift away from negative risk-taking and towards healthy exploration and learning.

The department is committed to supporting students into and through their Junior Secondary schooling through the Education Strategy *On track for success* priority. This research and evidence paper has identified opportunities to support ongoing and future work in this area.

Considerations

Facilitate system-wide professional conversations to co-design an evidence-informed conceptual framework that identifies areas for attention and action when ensuring responsiveness to the needs of contemporary Junior Secondary learners.

Reinvigorate teacher capability, knowledge and understanding of innovative strategies, effective practice and high-impact approaches that foster and support Junior Secondary learner behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement, motivation and resilience.

Provide an evidence-informed model and resources to support schools to conceptualise, plan and implement an intentional improvement journey into and through Junior Secondary.

Clarify the position of Year 10 in state schools while balancing flexible approaches to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum that meet the needs of students, and maintain whole-of-system equity and accountability.

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