Student disengagement in Years 7 to 9 in Victoria

A review of recent evidence

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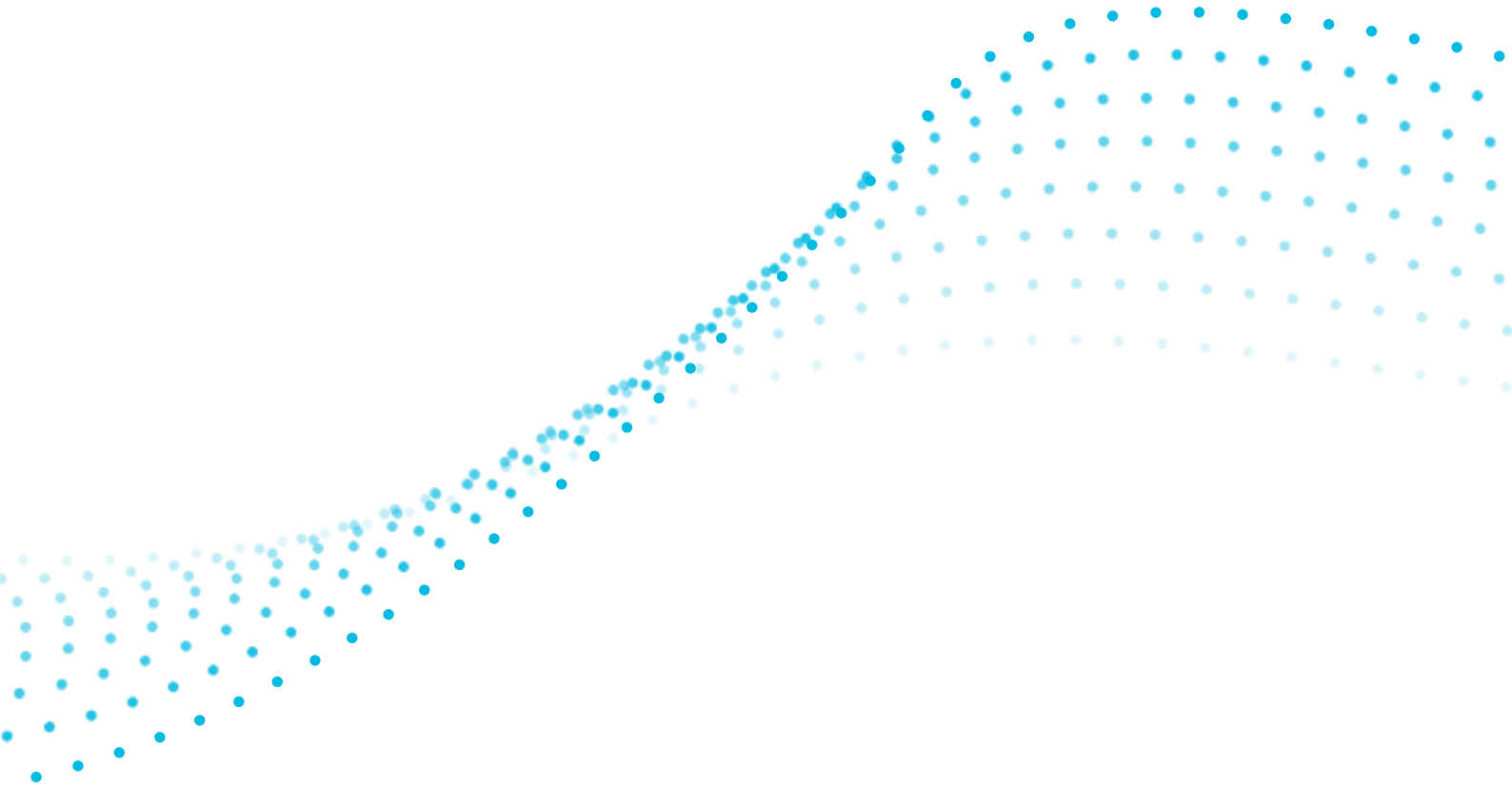

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1. Introduction

Background and context

The *Alice Springs (Mpartnwe) Education Declaration* recognises the importance of enhancing student development in the middle years, noting that it is "a time when they are at the greatest risk of disengagement from learning" (Education Council, 2019, p. 13). The declaration highlights the need to enhance student motivation and engagement during this challenging time. It emphasises the need to support the development of peer relationships and broader support for students as they transition through these years of schooling. Providing opportunities for students to continue to develop literacy and numeracy skills as foundational to their learning continues to be critical, while providing authentic learning experiences that enable students to develop broader capabilities is highlighted as vital. The declaration emphasises the need for educational experiences that provide sufficient challenge, foster engagement, and are considered rewarding for students. Although challenges around engagement in middle years have been recognised for some time (such as through the previous education declaration, the *Melbourne Declaration*), challenges remain.

Report purpose

The research reported here was conducted as part of the Reclaiming the Lost Years project, which aims to raise awareness of the need for structural reform in Years 7 to 9 schooling in Victoria. As an initial research paper within the project, the research reported here set out to review relevant literature and broader evidence about student disengagement in Years 7 to 9 in Victoria. Findings can inform the project's advocacy for reform and key policy recommendations.

Defining and measuring student engagement and disengagement

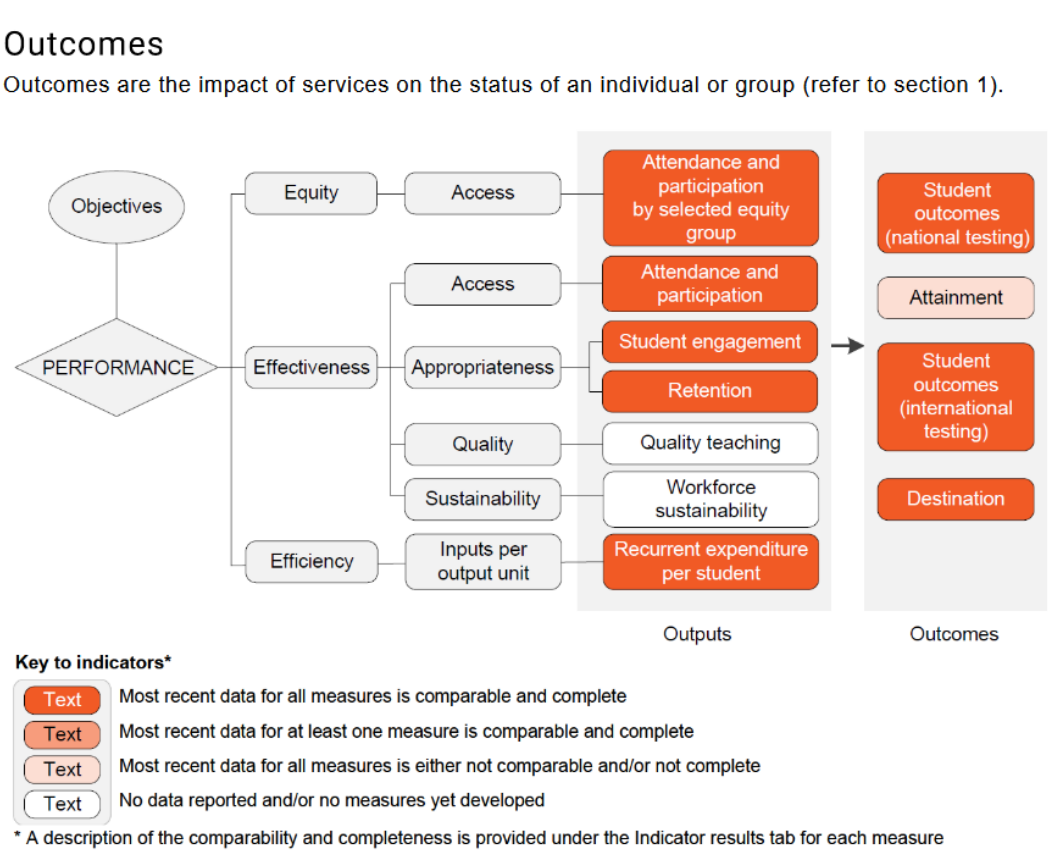
Student engagement and disengagement are multifaceted constructs, that include cognitive, behavioural, and affective aspects (Fredricks et al., 2004). Cognitive engagement includes motivation to learn, resilience, and persistence in learning, including students' investment in tasks. Behavioural engagement includes physical participation in educational experiences and schooling more broadly, including attendance. Affective or emotional engagement involves students' relationship with learning and their connectedness to the school community. Student engagement may vary over time, in response to factors within their educational environment.

Student engagement, or lack of it, may be manifested in a variety of ways. Some of this evidence may be relatively easy to observe, such as absenteeism or truancy or behavioural disruptions. However, some students may be quietly disengaged, and if not identified, may end up in a negative spiral of disengagement. In addition, some evidence is systematically captured through data tracking mechanisms or annual surveys, whereas other data are more difficult to capture or access. The Productivity Commission provides an overview of indicators for educational outcomes in Australia in a framework (see Figure 1). This framework indicates which data sources are available at a national level to evaluate the overall education system's productivity, outputs, and outcomes.

Key considerations in the Productivity Commission's framework (Figure 1) include equity, effectiveness, and efficiency. In combination, aspects in this model provide an overview of what may be a theory of change or logical model at a systemic level. In relation to equity, access is identified as a key factor, as measured by attendance and participation by specific groups of students. Access is also an important indicator for effectiveness, in relation to attendance and participation in education. However, access only is not enough to achieve desired educational outcomes. Effectiveness indicators also include the appropriateness of education, which influences student engagement and retention.

This figure suggests that recent Australian data on student attendance and engagement is comparable and complete. However, availability and data coverage of dimensions related to student engagement vary across jurisdictions, warranting consideration of broader evidence sources. Quality teaching and sustainability of the workforce are also identified as key factors, but no national data are available to evaluate these components at this stage. Finally, efficiency is calculated based on expenditure per student in return for desired outcomes. Outcomes are largely defined in terms of achievement on educational assessments. In addition, the final box in outcomes, destination, speaks to the long-term impact of education on student life opportunities.

Figure 1. Performance indicator framework of school education by Productivity Commission (2025, p. 58)



It is important to acknowledge that how engagement is measured varies considerably across studies. Research highlights the value of complementary data sources to evidence levels of student engagement. In this review, data from students, their families, and system-level data capture was considered to generate a comprehensive picture of student disengagement.

Report outline

Section 2 provides an overview of methods applied to undertake the evidence review. Section 3 presents findings in the form of a thematic narrative synthesis. Section 4 provides a brief conclusion and view forward in the context of Elevo's aspirations building on this work. The final section includes references to reviewed evidence sources and background information.

2. Methods

This section provides an overview of methods applied in undertaking this evidence review.

2.1 Review of sources

This review adopted a rapid review methodology. Rapid reviews are faster alternatives to traditional systematic reviews, which can take 6 months to 2 years. Systematic reviews answer research questions by rigorously identifying, appraising, and synthesizing studies (Gough et al., 2017). Rapid reviews speed up this process with a pragmatic approach to be achievable within shorter timelines (Wollscheid & Tripney, 2021). The review broadly involved four stages: (1) scoping, (2) searching and screening, and (3) analysing, synthesising and reporting.

2.1.1 Scoping

The scoping stage involved defining the review focus and approach. The review aim was to identify evidence relevant to student disengagement among students in Years 7 to 9 in Victoria. At times, evidence from across a broader age bracket and/or geographical region was included.

To capture the breadth of evidence, this review sought to identify the evidence about rates of student disengagement in Victoria, organised according to key factors influencing disengagement. In doing so, we drew upon published literature, including reports involving analyses of primary data sets, as well as primary analyses of publicly available datasets. This review did not set out to identify the multitude of factors that influence student engagement or disengagement per se. A comprehensive overview of evidence-based practices as aligned to nine domains of school improvement was documented in 2022 by ACER and the Queensland Department of Education (ACER & QLD DET, 2022), in the *School Improvement Tool: Elaborations for Student Engagement and Wellbeing*.

Our approach to narrowing the scope of the rapid reviews to be feasible within a compressed timeframe involved prioritising studies to be reviewed by relevance, as well as prioritising use of quality systematic reviews and analyses of datasets rather than analysing primary data when appropriate.

2.1.2 Searching and screening

The screening and searching phase involved identifying and selecting relevant evidence. A multifaceted and iterative search strategy was employed to identify the most relevant evidence. As a starting point, sources relevant to the Victorian context captured in the literature review that underpins the ACER and QLD DET Elaborations for Student Engagement and Wellbeing (Van der Kleij et al., 2023). Another key source was the PISA 2022 national report (Volume II) for Australia (De Bortoli et al., 2024). In addition, a targeted database search was undertaken, using key terms related to engagement and disengagement.

Snowballing methods were employed to identify other relevant data sources, based on included publications and data sources. In doing so, we tried to identify more recent evidence. For example, one report cited evidence as documented by the Australian Productivity Commission some years ago. We then identified the latest relevant evidence from the Australian Productivity Commission's website.

In screening for inclusion, we aimed to identify the best possible evidence. That is, the evidence that is most relevant to student disengagement in Years 7 to 9 in Victoria in recent years. We took a staged approach to prioritising research to be reviewed. This approach involved selecting the most relevant

publications, rather than receiving all potentially relevant resources identified. The team then progressively identified further research for review, as well as any gaps in identified research to be addressed through further searches. This approach continued until saturation was reached, meaning that sufficient and appropriate evidence was documented to address specific aspects of disengagement.

2.1.3 Analysing, synthesising and reporting

The analysing, synthesising and reporting phase involved review and/or analysis of identified evidence. For each reviewed source of evidence, the team documented notes and inductively identified key themes. Findings were narratively synthesised and reported according to the key themes. For available datasets linked to reviewed reports, basic descriptive analyses and data visualisations were conducted to identify findings relevant to the target year levels. This included analysis of the PISA 2022 student questionnaire dataset (De Bortoli et al., 2024), as well as attendance data from the Productivity Commission (2025) report and the *National Report on Schooling in Australia* published by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). Statistics software (i.e., SPSS and Excel) were employed for the data analyses and visualisations.

2.2 Overview of evidence sources in the review

A total of 15 studies published between 2016 and 2025 were reviewed as part of the rapid review. These studies address the three primary dimensions of student engagement: cognitive (8 studies), socio-emotional (8 studies), and behavioural (6 studies). Among them, the national report of PISA 2022 (Volume II) and the accompanying student questionnaire dataset offer comprehensive data across all three aspects. In Victoria, 2,226 students aged around 15 participated in the PISA 2022 student questionnaire. Of these, 19.7% of students (n = 438) were in Years 8 and 9, while 79.2% of students (n = 1762) were in Year 10. While the data provide some insights into the engagement of students in Years 8 and 9, these findings should be considered with caution due to the relatively small sample size and the fact that the 15-year-olds in Years 8 and 9 are not representative of all students at these year levels in Victoria.

The 2024 *Attitudes to School Survey* (AtoSS), conducted by the Victorian Department of Education, also provided insights into a broad range of attitudes and engagement factors. Given the limitation of data access, only publicly available key findings and data snapshots from the AtoSS survey were included in this report. Additionally, the *National Report of Schooling in Australia* (ACARA, 2025) and the report by Productivity Commission (2025) are the primary sources for data on student attendance, which provide comprehensive historical data by geolocation, school sector, indigenous status, and gender. Table 1 provides an overview of evidence sources in the review, and how these relate to cognitive, socio-emotional, and/or behavioural aspects of (dis)engagement.

Table 1. Overview of evidence sources in the review

Author, Year	Cognitive engagement	(Socio-)emotional engagement	Behavioural engagement
ACARA, 2025			✓
Bowles et al., 2022		✓	
Burns et al., 2021	✓		
Burridge et al., 2016	✓	✓	
De Bortoli et al., 2024 AND PISA 2022 Student Questionnaire dataset	✓	✓	✓
Evans-Whipp et al., 2018	✓	✓	
Goss & Sonnemann, 2017			✓
McCarthy et al., 2018	✓		
McHale et al., 2024	✓	✓	
Productivity Commission, 2025			✓
Quin et al., 2017	✓	✓	
Redmond et al., 2016		✓	
Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, Commonwealth of Australia, 2023			✓
Victorian Department of Education, 2024	✓	✓	
Watterston & O'Connell, 2019			✓

3. Research findings

This section provides a thematic synthesis of key findings from the review of evidence. Although findings are organised by theme, it is important to realise that students may face multiple barriers to engagement in schooling. As such, findings across these themes need to be regarded in relation to one another. Consistent with findings from prior research, findings suggest that there is some variation in how engagement is operationalised and measured. Whereas some aspects of engagement, such as attendance, suspensions, and school completion are relatively easy to measure (e.g., McDonald et al., 2018), understanding student engagement requires a multifaceted approach (Burridge et al., 2016).

3.1 Evidence about rates of student disengagement in Victoria

Some of the reviewed studies reported the overall levels of student engagement in Victoria before examining engagement across specific dimensions. Research published ten years ago suggests that one in five Australian students were consistently disengaged from schooling (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015, as cited in Bowles et al., 2022). However, Burridge et al. (2016) were concerned that students were disengaging from school at a younger age than before. These researchers reported findings from a two-year action research study that explored factors contributing to student engagement and disengagement among Year 5 to 8 students in Mooney Valley, Victoria. The research was conducted in collaboration between the Maribyrnong and Moonee Valley Local Learning and Employment Network (MMVLLEN), Victoria University (VU) and five Mooney Valley schools. Data in this study showed that one-third of students experienced issues at school that placed them at risk of disengagement. Notably, more than a third of students in some participating schools reported sabotaging their own learning. More recent findings from Bowles et al.'s (2022) study among Melbourne-based students in Year 7 to 9 and 11 echo Burridge et al.'s (2016) concerns, suggesting the disengagement rate is higher in this context, at approximately one in two, than the overall proportion of Australian students reported in 2015 (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015, as cited in Bowles et al., 2022).

In a more recent study, McHale et al. (2024) reported findings from the Mission Australia annual survey, which is the largest national survey amongst young Australians, aged 15 to 19. In 2024, 4642 young people in Victoria responded to the *Youth Survey*. Key findings for Victoria showed that school and study is listed as the number one personal challenge by 44% respondents, which is similar to the 2023 figure (46%) and slightly higher than the 2022 figure (37%). Data for Victoria in relation to concerns about school and study are comparable to the national sample (44.7%). Concerns about school and study in Victoria were slightly higher among females (47.3%) compared to males (42.5%) or gender diverse young people (28.8%).

Most Victorian respondents to the *Youth Survey* 2024 were studying fulltime (86.2%), with a small proportion studying part-time (7.5%) or not studying (6.3%). Of those currently studying, about two thirds (62.9%) were very satisfied or satisfied with their studies, a little over a quarter (27.8%) was neither satisfied or dissatisfied, and almost one in ten students (9.2%) was dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Female students were relatively more satisfied compared to male or gender diverse students. Of those currently studying, 97.1% planned to complete Year 12. Intended completion rates among females were higher compared to male or gender-diverse students. These data suggest male and gender diverse young people in Victoria tend to be less engaged in education compared to their female peers.

3.2 Cognitive engagement

3.2.1 Effective teaching practices

Recent studies have shown that effective teaching practice is a key factor in student engagement in both learning and schooling more broadly. Findings from this review corroborate these findings within the Australian context. Modelling of longitudinal data from the New South Wales (NSW) *Tell Them From Me* survey and student achievement data on National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) shows a positive association between effective teaching practices and student engagement in their schooling (McCarthy et al., 2018). For students between Years 7 and 9 in NSW, findings from this survey indicate that when students experience high-quality teaching practices, where teachers set high expectations and use learning time effectively, there are positive associations with student attendance, behaviour, motivation, and learning outcomes.

In Victoria, effective teaching practices are captured in the *Attitudes to School Survey* (AtoSS), administered annually in Term 2 for students from Year 4 to Year 12 (Victorian Department of Education, 2024). This survey aims to gain insights into students' perspectives on their school, with a view to improving their schooling experience. In 2024, more than 370,000 Victorian students participated in AtoSS. For students in Years 7 to 9, 81% of measured survey factors showed improvement, including those related to effective teaching practices. Most students reported that their teachers have high expectations for their success and believe that they can do well. High expectations for student learning are widely recognised as making a difference to student outcomes (e.g., Goss & Sonnemann, 2017). In addition to teachers' expectations, 49.3% of students in Years 7 to 9 reported that "teachers are making students interested in learning", reflecting a 1.3 percentage point increase from the previous year. These findings suggest a positive trend in students' perception of teaching during the middle years of schooling.

Students' perception of teacher support is also associated with students' behaviours and learning engagement. This factor was measured in PISA 2022 as the frequency of teachers' behaviours in the mathematics classes reported by students (De Bortoli et al., 2024). Findings from PISA 2022 showed differences in mean mathematics performance between high and low quarters of the teacher support index. The differences ranged from 34 to 50 points across all Australian jurisdictions, with a difference of 41 points observed in Victoria.

Table 2 presents the frequencies and percentages of students who reported teacher support occurred in most or all lessons in their mathematics classes by year level in Victoria. Overall, more than 65% of students in Years 8 and 9 reported that their teacher supported them in most or all mathematics lessons. Among the various teacher support behaviours, the most frequently reported was "the teacher helps students with their learning," with 77.4% of students in these year levels agreeing. Compared to their peers in Year 10, a greater proportion of students in Years 8 and 9 reported receiving teacher support in most or all lessons across all survey statements.

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of students who reported teacher support occurred in most lessons or every lesson of their mathematics classes, by year level, in Victoria in PISA 2022

Year level	The teacher shows an interest in every student's learning		The teacher gives extra help when students need it		The teacher helps students with their learning		The teacher continues teaching until the students understand	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
8-9	286	65.3	321	73.3	339	77.4	293	66.9
10	1115	63.3	1290	73.2	1317	74.7	1139	64.6

All respondents in Victoria reported a relatively higher level of teacher support (M = 0.15) than in all other jurisdictions, except South Australia (M = 0.19). Fewer students in Victoria (68%) reported that "the teacher shows an interest in every student's learning" compared to South Australia (72%), the Australian Capital Territory (70%), and Tasmania (69%). Fewer students in Victoria (69%) reported that "the teacher continues teaching until the students understand" than students in South Australia (73%) and the Australian Capital Territory (70%). These data provide insightful comparisons but also indicate that a proportion of students across all states and territories feel they are not consistently supported in their learning.

The survey study by Quin et al. (2017) also investigated students' perceptions of the extent to which teachers supported their autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as aligned with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000, cited in Quin et al., 2017). Quin et al. (2017) surveyed 88 Year 7 students from across three schools in Victoria to examine associations between perceived teacher support (conceptualised as teaching quality in this study) and engagement. The study builds on prior research which highlights the influence of contextual factors and relationship factors on student engagement in schooling. This study builds on insights from prior research which suggests that student engagement can be influenced by staff in schools. Survey findings showed that perceived teacher support was positively associated with students' behavioural and emotional engagement, but not their cognitive engagement. In the discussion section, the researchers reflected on the non-statistically significant association between perceptions of teacher support and students' cognitive engagement. They observed that cognitive engagement may be subject or discipline-specific and requires more granular measures. Overall, the study findings highlight the important role of teachers in fostering student engagement.

3.2.2 Student-teacher relationships

The impact of student-teacher relationships on how students perceive learning and their school experience has been examined in previous studies. Evidence suggests that positive student-teacher relationships are associated with increased engagement and academic achievement. Findings from PISA 2022 indicated an association between students' perception of student-teacher relationships and mathematics performance (De Bortoli et al., 2024). Across Australian jurisdictions, the mean performance gap in mathematics between students in the highest and lowest quartiles of the

student–teacher relationship index ranged from 35 to 64 score points. In Victoria, this disparity was 60 points, suggesting that some students in Victoria who have poor relationships with their teachers achieve considerably lower levels of learning compared to their peers who do have good relationships with their teacher.

In PISA 2022, Student-teacher relationships were measured by asking students to rate their level of agreement on a four-point scale to eight statements. Table 3 displays the frequencies and percentages of Victorian students who agreed with the statements by year levels. The results from the questionnaire showed that 57.1% of students in Years 8 and 9 agreed that their teachers are respectful towards them, while around 40 to 50% of students reported high-level agreement with other statements, which indicate positive student-teacher relationships. The proportions of students who disagreed or strongly disagreed with these positive statements ranged from 5% regarding teacher respect, to 18.5% regarding teachers' interest in student wellbeing.

For items indicating negative student-teacher relationships, a greater proportion of students in Years 8 and 9 reported feeling intimidated by their teachers (13.9%) compared to a proportion of students who reported that teachers are mean towards them (6.6%).

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages of students who agreed or strongly agreed with statements relating to student-teacher relationships, by year level, in Victoria in PISA 2022

Year level	The teachers at my school are respectful towards me		If I walked into my classes upset, my teachers would be concerned about me		If I came back to visit my school 3 years from now, my teachers would be excited to see me		When my teachers ask how I am doing, they are really interested in my answer	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
8-9	250	57.1	210	47.9	178	40.6	181	41.3
10	990	56.2	730	41.4	808	45.9	674	38.3

Year level	The teachers at my school are friendly towards me		The teachers at my school are interested in students' well-being		I feel intimidated by the teachers at my school		The teachers at my school are mean towards me	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
8-9	204	46.6	218	49.8	61	13.9	29	6.6
10	826	46.9	777	44.1	208	11.8	133	7.5

Among students in Year 10, over 5 percentage points fewer students reported teachers showed concern when they "walked into my classes upset" (41.4%) or interest in their wellbeing (44.1%), suggesting a downward trend in students' perceptions of supportive student-teacher relationships when they progress to a higher year level.

Across Australian jurisdictions, all respondents in Victoria reported less positive student-teacher relationships than students in the Australian Capital Territory, South Australia, and the OECD on average (De Bortoli et al., 2024). The differences across jurisdictions can be observed at the statement level. Students in Victoria reported lower levels of agreement with the following statements in comparison with students from the Australian Capital Territory and South Australia:

- "if I walked into my classes upset, my teachers would be concerned about me"
- "when my teachers ask how I am doing, they are really interested in my answer"
- "the teachers at my school are friendly towards me"
- "the teachers at my school are interested in students' well-being".

In addition to PISA 2022, recent findings from the 2024 AtoSS indicate positive perceptions of student-teacher relationships. Specifically, 64.4% of students in Years 7 to 9 reported that "a teacher looks out for them at school", representing a 1.5 percentage point increase from the previous year. Despite the improvement, a substantial proportion of students in these year levels still do not report having positive student–teacher relationships, which may affect their engagement levels.

3.2.3 Classroom disciplinary climate

A positive classroom disciplinary climate can help students maintain concentration levels, thereby enhancing their learning opportunities (Gruber, 2020, as cited in De Bortoli et al., 2024). Findings from PISA 2022 showed differences in mean mathematics performance between high and low quarters of the classroom disciplinary climate index. The differences ranged from 40 to 81 points across all Australian jurisdictions, with a difference of 55 points in Victoria. These findings highlight the important relationship between an orderly classroom environment, and student learning outcomes. Student disengagement may manifest in disruptive behaviour. At the same time, a disorderly learning environment may hinder student engagement when it makes it difficult for students to focus. PISA results also point to digital devices as a source of (hidden) disengagement.

Table 4 presents the frequencies and percentages of students in Victoria who reported that the statements related to disciplinary climate occurred in most or every lesson. Among students in Years 8 and 9, 34.2% reported that "there is noise and disorder", making it the most frequently reported among all disciplinary climate items. Furthermore, the distraction caused by the use of digital resources is noteworthy. Around 27% of students reported being either personally distracted by digital resources or affected by peers using them during class. Unlike other disciplinary issues—which declined substantially in Year 10—the proportion of students distracted by using digital resources showed little decrease, becoming one of the primary issues when students progressed to Year 10.

Table 4. Frequencies and percentages of students who reported that the statements related to disciplinary climate occurred in most or every lesson, by year level, in Victoria in PISA 2022

Year level	Students do not listen to what the teacher said		There is noise and disorder		The teacher has to wait a long time for students to quiet down		Students cannot work well	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
8-9	109	24.9%	150	34.2	102	23.3	77	17.6
10	315	17.9	454	25.8	292	16.6	249	14.1

Year level	Students do not start working for a long time after the lesson begins		Students get distracted by using [digital resources] (e.g. smartphones, websites, apps)		Students get distracted by other students who are using [digital resources] (e.g. smartphones, websites, apps)	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
8-9	90	20.5	120	27.4	121	27.6
10	316	17.9	454	25.8	408	23.2

Across Australian jurisdictions, all respondents in Victoria reported a more favourable disciplinary climate than students in Tasmania, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and Queensland. These differences can be seen at the statement level. Fewer Victorian students reported the following issues compared to students in all other jurisdictions:

- “students do not listen to what the teacher said” (29%)
- “the teacher has to wait a long time for students to quiet down in most classes” (26%)
- “students cannot work well in most classes” (22%)
- “students do not start working for a long time after the lesson begins” (28%)
- “students get distracted by other students who are using digital resources (e.g. smartphones, websites, apps) in most classes” (36%).

Although these results are relatively positive overall, they point to issues with the classroom’s disciplinary climate that hinder disengagement in a considerable proportion of classrooms. These results indicate that a poor disciplinary climate is experienced by one in five students.

3.2.4 Learner characteristics and disposition

Motivation

A lack of motivation and confidence hinders students' engagement in learning activities. In 2024, 4642 young people (aged 15 to 19) in Victoria responded to the *Youth Survey* (McHale et al., 2024). Findings from the survey showed that approximately a quarter of young people (27.6%) in Victoria reported experiencing barriers to achieving their study or work goals. The top three barriers reported by these young people were a lack of motivation (39%), mental health (38.4%), and a lack of confidence (32.3%). These percentages were slightly higher than the national average. The identified barriers were most frequently reported by gender-diverse young people, followed by females.

Burridge et al. (2016) reported on a two-year action research study that aimed to identify what factors contributed to student engagement and disengagement among Year 5 to 8 students in Victoria. In this project, 245 students responded to a Motivation and Engagement Survey (Martin, 2013, as cited in Burridge et al., 2016), which included items that capture factors that positively or negatively contribute to student engagement, labelled 'boosters' and 'guzzlers'. Items in 'boosters' scale include students' self-belief, persistence, learning focus, valuing, task management, and planning, while those in 'guzzlers' capture disengagement, self-sabotage, uncertainty control, failure avoidance, and anxiety. Findings from this study showed that schools with higher scores for 'boosters' had relatively lower scores for 'guzzlers'. These findings point to the important interrelatedness between factors influencing engagement as well as disengagement in schooling. Data showed that some students identified challenges with task management, planning, and achieving success in learning. One noteworthy finding is that more than a third of students in some of the participating schools reported sabotaging their own learning.

Perseverance

Perseverance, which refers to students' willingness to persist in working toward a goal despite challenges and obstacles, has been found to be associated with their motivation, learning behaviours, and performance (De Bortoli et al., 2024). Findings from PISA 2022 showed differences in mean mathematics performance between high and low quarters of the perseverance index in Australia. The differences ranged from 41 points in Tasmania to 65 points in Victoria, indicating a comparatively stronger relationship between perseverance and academic performance in Victoria.

Table 5 presents the frequencies and percentages of students in Victoria who agreed or strongly agreed with statements relating to perseverance. It is important to note that only approximately 50% of students in Years 8, 9, and 10 responded to this question, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Among the students in Years 8 and 9 in the total sample, 26.5% reported they finished what they started, and 28.3% of students indicated that they "apply additional effort when work becomes challenging". A notable finding is that while 24.4% of students in Years 8 and 9 reported they finish tasks that they started even when they become boring, 12.1% students in Years 8 and 9 disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, indicating students may struggle with sustaining effort.

For items indicating low perseverance, 13.9% of students reported that they "stop when work becomes too difficult", and 14.2% of those reported quitting doing homework if it takes too long. Although a comparatively greater proportion of Year 10 students agreed that they could perform well in the two perseverance-related behaviours, the highest reported proportion was still only 30.4%. These findings suggest that a lack of perseverance gets in the way of engagement in learning and subsequent learning outcomes.

Table 5. Frequencies and percentages of students who agreed or strongly agreed with statements relating to perseverance, by year level, in Victoria in PISA 2022

Year level	I keep working on a task until it is finished		I apply additional effort when work becomes challenging		I finish tasks that I started even when they become boring		I am more persistent than most people I know		I complete tasks even when they become more difficult than I thought		I finish what I start	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
8-9	118	26.9	124	28.3	107	24.4	84	19.2	116	26.5	116	26.5
10	506	28.7	536	30.4	420	23.8	373	21.2	516	29.3	502	28.5

Year level	I give up after making mistakes		I quit doing homework if it is too long		I stop when work becomes too difficult		I give up easily	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
8-9	26	5.9	62	14.2	61	13.9	31	7.1
10	118	6.7	277	15.7	215	12.2	181	10.3

Overall, in PISA 2022, respondents in all Australian jurisdictions reported lower levels of perseverance than the OECD average. Across jurisdictions, students recorded similar levels of perseverance, with the largest difference between students in Victoria and South Australia (M = -0.09) and those in Tasmania (M = -0.18). These findings suggest that low perseverance is a nationwide concern in Australia, with only minor variation across states and territories.

Academic ability and progress

Emerging evidence indicates that student engagement is connected to academic ability and progress. In the *Youth Survey* in 2024, academic ability was identified as a common barrier reported by 26.3% young people (aged 15-19) in Victoria, which suggests that students did not feel they were well prepared to undertake their studies (McHale et al., 2024).

Results from Evans-Whipp et al.'s (2018) study on middle-year students in Melbourne showed that students who are not making adequate progress are almost twice as likely to become disengaged from school by Year 7 compared to their peers who are making the most progress, regardless of their Year 3 achievement levels. These findings highlight the important motivational reciprocity between engagement and making progress in learning.

3.2.5 Curriculum and learning opportunities

Curriculum and learning opportunities provided in schools may also influence student engagement, although limited evidence relevant to this dimension was identified in this review. Quin et al. (2017) cite Roeser et al. (2000) who described the three-way relationship between these aspects as follows:

> "Adolescents' decision to engage in learning or not in the classroom depend in some measure on whether they feel able to meet the challenges presented them, whether they see purpose and value in classroom activities, and whether they feel safe and cared for by others in the setting" (p. 454).

Burns et al. (2021) investigated the role of future time perspectives, defined as consisting of valuing the importance of school and aspirations to complete school. The study involved surveys at two time points with a one-year interval, administered to a sample of students in years 7 to 10 from across 9 independent Catholic schools in New South Wales and Victoria. Findings showed that student aspirations for completing school were positively associated with increased levels of engagement, and decreased levels of disengagement over a one-year period. Findings specifically suggested that valuing school as important is a major factor in preventing disengagement. Further, findings suggest that students who recognise the importance of schooling are more likely to see the benefits of staying in school to achieve longer-term life aspirations. Similarly, findings from Burridge et al.'s (2016) study also showed that students who valued schooling were generally focused on their learning and believed in their capabilities.

However, findings from a recent survey conducted as part of the Life Patterns research program showed that students perceive a misalignment between the expected curriculum and the curriculum currently provided by the education system (Fu et al., 2025). A total of 4,728 Australian students in Years 11 and 12 participated in this survey in 2023. Survey findings revealed that students think the curriculum does not prepare them for their lives after school. This perception of misalignment may further influence students' value of schooling and engagement.

Burridge et al.'s (2016) study provided insights into curriculum and learning opportunities that encourage or discourage motivation and engagement, drawing on data from small group interviews with students in Years 5 to 8 in Victoria. These rich qualitative data indicated that the encouraging elements included:

- studying topics or subject areas that align with students' own interests
- opportunities for active learning
- having a say in curriculum decisions
- challenging but achievable learning tasks
- teacher levels of enthusiasm and expertise
- constructive teacher feedback
- opportunities for group work and discussion
- co-curricular activities.

Discouraging elements included

- tasks without a clear purpose or repetitive tasks
- a lack of quality feedback to inform the next steps in learning
- feeling unsure about how to complete a task
- feeling unsure about teacher expectations and how they may achieve them
- tasks that are too challenging.

3.3 (Socio)-Emotional engagement

3.3.1 Health and wellbeing

During puberty, various brain regions that regulate emotions, social interactions, and self-awareness develop rapidly, which has drastic impacts on a young person's wellbeing (Evans-Whipp et al., 2018). Research also shows that the way in which students engage with their environment during this time shifts substantially; "the middle years are characterised by increased peer influence, high levels of risk taking and poor self-regulation" (Evans-Whipp et al., 2018, p. 9). During the middle years, students become increasingly independent from their families, navigating their new identities as a young person. All these challenges and changes may have consequences for how students see themselves as learners, and how they engage with schooling (Evans-Whipp et al., 2018).

Growing numbers of studies have recognised the interrelatedness of student wellbeing, engagement, and learning (Quin et al., 2017). To examine changes in student wellbeing levels as they progress through the middle years of schooling, Evans-Whipp et al. (2018) examined longitudinal data from the Childhood to Adolescence Transition Study (CATS). Participants were sampled from schools in metropolitan Melbourne. The study focused specifically on changes reported by students and their parents between Year 3 (data collected in 2012) and Year 7 (data collected in 2016). A particular focus was the examination of student wellbeing, student learning, peer relationships, and their engagement in schooling. Although the results are based on data collected some time ago, they clearly indicate that a substantial proportion of Victorian students experience significant challenges in their schooling, which limits their wellbeing, engagement, and learning outcomes. Approximately one in five students has persistent emotional and/or behavioural problems. Evans-Whipp et al.'s (2018) findings further highlight the potentially detrimental effects of poor wellbeing, and positive protective effects of high levels of wellbeing.

In the 2024 *Youth Survey*, mental health was identified as the second most significant personal challenge, reported by 21% of young people in Victoria (slightly lower than the 23% reported in 2022) (McHale et al., 2024). Personal relationships ranked third (21%), with a slightly higher proportion of respondents reporting this as a major challenge compared to previous years (20% in 2023 and 17% in 2022). Particularly alarming are the statistics about gender diverse young people's mental health in Victoria, with over three-quarters of respondents identifying as gender diverse reporting mental health as a barrier to achieving their study or work goals. Other health-related barriers were also reported, including physical health and disability, with many respondents identifying more than one barrier. Consistent with the findings from the 2024 Youth Survey, in the Australian Child Wellbeing Project, Redmond et al. (2016) found that low levels of wellbeing were most often reported by young people who faced personal or contextual challenges, including living with disability, having caring responsibilities, coming from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds, and/or living in out of home care, and those in rural and remote areas. One major cause of low engagement in schooling in this study was hunger.

PISA 2022 further investigated students' mental health, specifically the resistance to stress. Table 6 presents the frequencies and percentages of students in Victoria who agreed or strongly agreed with statements relating to stress resistance. It is important to note that only approximately 50% of students in Years 8, 9, and 10 responded to this question, which may limit the generalisability of the findings.

Among the students in Years 8 and 9 in the total sample, 23.1% reported that they can “work under pressure”. 18% of students in these year levels indicated that they can “handle stress well”, while 13.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Additionally, approximately 30% reported they “feel nervous about approaching exams”. These findings suggest that a notable proportion of students perceive low levels of resistance to stress.

Although a relatively similar proportion of Year 10 students reported feeling stressed easily, their perceived ability to “work under pressure” and recover from setbacks was substantially higher.

Across Australian jurisdictions, all respondents in Victoria (M = -0.06) and Queensland (M = -0.06) reported less resistance to stress than students in New South Wales (M = 0.04) and the Northern Territory (M = 0.02). This suggests a need for targeted support to build stress resilience among students in Victoria and Queensland to address their comparatively lower resistance to stress.

Table 6. Frequencies and percentages of students who agreed or strongly agreed with statements relating to stress resistance, by year level, in Victoria in PISA 2022

Year level	I remain calm under stress		I am more relaxed than most people I know		I can recover quickly after something bad has happened		I handle stress well		I am able to work under pressure	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
8-9	87	19.9	97	22.1	91	20.8	79	18	101	23.1
10	392	22.2	373	21.2	431	24.5	316	17.9	534	30.3

Year level	I get nervous easily		I feel nervous about approaching exams		I worry about many things		I panic easily		I am afraid of many things	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
8-9	99	22.6	128	29.2	114	26.0	86	19.6	58	13.2
10	466	26.4	527	29.9	536	30.4	338	19.2	268	15.2

Significant improvements in health and wellbeing factors have been reported in the 2024 AtoSS, with many of these being the most positive results since the health and wellbeing factors were introduced into the survey in 2021 (Victorian Department of Education, 2024). There were improvements across all year level groups from 2023, with more than half of students in Years 7 to 9 reporting greater life satisfaction (54.6%), improved physical health (57.1%), and easier access to health services (61.6%). For emotional and relational engagement factors, improvements were observed across all year levels in emotional awareness and regulation, peer relationships, and help seeking. Although this upward

trend is encouraging, it must be noted that a substantial number of Victorian students are still grappling with health and wellbeing issues.

In addition, evidence showed positive relationships between student wellbeing, engagement, and academic performance. Quin et al.'s (2017) survey results on Year 7 students in Victoria suggest that students with higher academic grades, females, and students with better levels of mental health were more likely to show high levels of behavioural engagement. In addition, findings showed that low academic achievement was positively correlated with low levels of mental wellbeing, in both males (r = .24) and females (r = .64).

Results from PISA 2022 showed differences in mean mathematics performance between high and low quarters of the stress resistance index in Australia (De Bortoli et al., 2024). Australian students in the highest quarter scored higher than those in the lowest quarter of this index. This means that students who are able to handle stress well had considerably higher mathematics achievement levels. The differences ranged from 18 points in New South Wales to 52 points in the Northern Territory. The disparity in Victoria was 19 points.

Results from Bowles et al.'s (2022) cluster analysis also showed a relationship between wellbeing and academic performance. This study identified two student engagement profiles: striving (disengaged) and thriving (engaged) in a sample of 331 students from Year 7, Year 9, and Year 11 in the Melbourne area. Each engagement profile represented approximately half of the sampled students. These two groups showed contrasting profiles on four factors of engagement in schooling, as well as achievement outcomes. Students in the thriving group achieved higher grades in mathematics and English and reported more positive emotions.

3.3.2 Sense of belonging

A positive sense of belonging in the school community can facilitate students' effort investment, motivation, and engagement (De Bortoli et al., 2024). PISA 2022 and the 2024 AtoSS have tracked the sense of belonging of Victorian students. Findings from PISA 2022 showed that students in the highest quarter of the sense of belonging index performed higher than students in the lowest quarter in Victoria and the other four Australian jurisdictions. The differences in mean mathematics performance ranged from 21 points in Victoria and 34 points in South Australia and Western Australia.

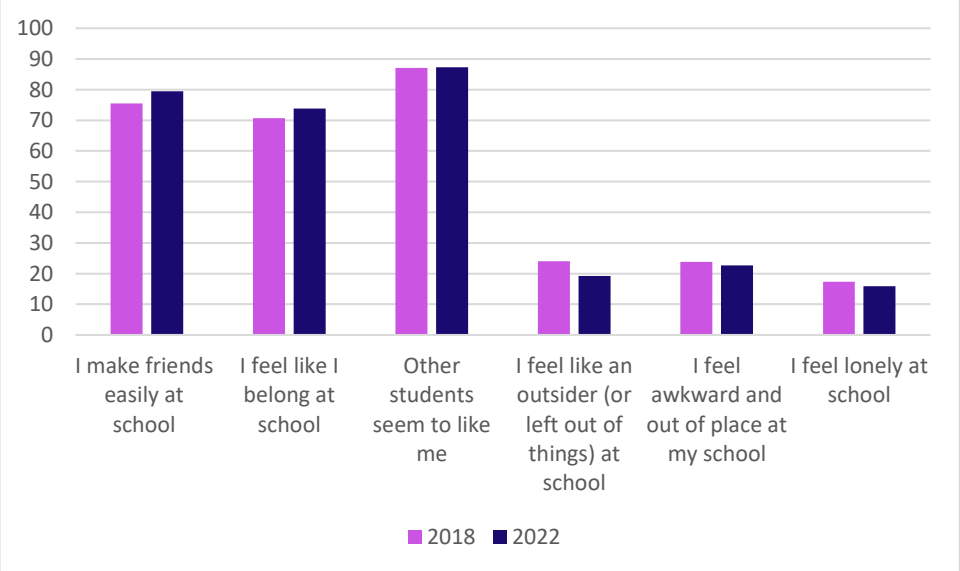
Table 7 presents the frequencies and percentages of students in Victoria who agreed or strongly agreed with statements related to sense of belonging. Among Years 8 and 9 students, more than half reported a positive sense of belonging, as indicated by the statements, "make friends easily" (58.2%), "feel like I belong at school" (56.2%), and "other students seem to like me" (69.6%). In contrast, 19.9%, 21.9%, and 11.4% of students, respectively, disagreed or strongly disagreed with these three statements, highlighting that a notable minority may not share this positive sense of belonging. Additionally, between 13% and 16% of students agreed or strongly agreed with statements indicating a negative sense of belonging, such as "I feel like an outsider at school". Among Year 10 students, a relative greater proportion of students reported that they can make friends easily and feel like they belong at school, while the proportions for the other statements remained at similar levels. These findings highlight that, although many students experience a positive sense of belonging, a notable minority continue to feel disconnected.

Table 7. Frequencies and percentages of students who agreed or strongly agreed with statements related to sense of belonging, by year level, in Victoria in PISA 2022

Year level	I make friends easily at school		I feel like I belong at school		Other students seem to like me		I feel like an outsider (or left out of things) at school		I feel awkward and out of place in my school		I feel lonely at school	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
8-9	255	58.2	246	56.2	305	69.6	69	15.8	71	16.2	56	12.8
10	1153	65.4	1050	59.6	1232	69.9	266	15.1	317	18.0	221	12.5

All respondents in Victoria reported a greater sense of belonging than students in all other jurisdictions in PISA 2022. However, compared to the results from PISA 2018, Victoria was the only Australian jurisdiction to report a change in students' sense of belonging, with the mean score decreasing from 2018 (M = -0.12) to 2022 (M = -0.19) (Productivity Commission, 2025). Figure 2 presents the percentage of students in Victoria who agreed and strongly agreed with the statement relating to sense of belonging in 2018 and 2022. There was a 5-percentage point decrease in the proportion of Victorian students who reported that they "feel like an outsider at school" and 4 percentage point increase in the proportion of Victorian students who agreed with the statement "I make friends easily at school" from PISA 2018 to 2022. This suggests that despite an overall decline in the index score, some aspects of social belonging among Victorian students have improved, highlighting areas of progress that can be built upon to further enhance students' school experiences.

Figure 2. Percentage of students in Victoria who agreed and strongly agreed with the statement relating to sense of belonging in PISA 2018 and PISA 2022 based on data from Productivity Commission (2025)



Students' sense of belonging was also investigated in the AtoSS (Victorian Department of Education, 2025). In 2024, 46.9% of students in Victoria from Years 7 to 9 reported having a sense of belonging at

their school, representing a 1.6 percentage point improvement from 2023. This improvement reflects gradual progress in fostering students' sense of belonging, although there remains significant room for further growth, as fewer than half of the students reported feeling this connection.

3.3.3 Student safety

A safe learning environment is crucial for students' development and participation in school activities. Students' experience of bullying, racism, feeling towards safety, and perceived ability to react to safety issues in school environments have been investigated across evidence sources reviewed.

The longitudinal data from the Childhood to Adolescence Transition Study (CATS) showed bullying appears to be a considerable issue, with approximately one in five students reporting they were persistently bullied across Years 3 to 5 (Evans-Whipp et al., 2018).

In PISA 2022, student safety was investigated through two scales: exposure to bullying and feeling safe in school environments. Table 8 presents the frequencies and percentages of students in Victoria who reported a few times a month or once a week for the statements related to exposure to bullying in the past 12 months. Among the students in Years 8 and 9, 15.8% reported that "other students made fun of me", and 10% reported that "other students left me out of things on purpose" frequently. In comparison, the proportions of Year 10 students reporting frequent experiences of bullying across all statements were substantially lower.

Table 8. Frequencies and percentages of students who reported a few times a month or once a week for the statements related to exposure to bullying, by year level, in Victoria in PISA 2022

Year level	Other students left me out of things on purpose		Other students made fun of me		I was threatened by other students		Other students took away or destroyed things that belonged to me		I got hit or pushed around by other students		Other students spread nasty rumours about me	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
8-9	44	10.0	69	15.8	28	6.4	19	4.3	31	7.1	33	7.5
10	136	7.7	229	13.0	57	3.2	56	3.2	84	4.8	106	6.0

Across all Australian jurisdictions, respondents in Victoria reported the lowest level of exposure to bullying (M = -0.07). Between PISA 2018 and 2022, smaller proportions of students in Victoria reported bullying for all items. Specifically, there was a 5-percentage point decrease in students who reported that "other students made fun of me" (De Bortoli et al., 2024). These findings show an encouraging trend. At the same time, it is evident that being bullied remains a serious issue for a proportion of Victorian students in early secondary education.

The results in PISA 2022 also showed a negative relationship between exposure to bullying and mathematics performance in Victoria and the other 4 jurisdictions. Students in the higher quarter of the exposure to bullying index performed significantly lower in mathematics than students in the

lower quarter of the index. The difference between the mean mathematics performance of the higher and lower quarter was -23 points.

In addition to exposure to bullying, the feeling of safety at school was measured by four items in PISA 2022. The frequencies and percentages of students in Victoria who agreed or strongly agreed with statements relating to feelings of safety in school environments are displayed in Table 9. Among the students in Years 8 and 9, the majority of students reported feeling safe "on my way to school", "on my way home from school", and "in my classrooms at school". Notably, a smaller proportion (84.5%) of students reported "feeling safe at other places at school (e.g., hallway, cafeteria, and restroom)", suggesting that these locations may present particular safety concerns.

Table 9. Frequencies and percentages of students who agreed or strongly agreed with statements relating to feelings of safety, by year level, in Victoria in PISA 2022

Year level	I feel safe on my way to school		I feel safe on my way home from school		I feel safe in my classrooms at school		I feel safe at other places at school (e.g. hallway, cafeteria, restroom)	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
8-9	404	92.2	401	91.6	398	90.9	370	84.5
10	1630	92.5	1630	91.0	1614	91.6	1519	86.2

Across all Australian jurisdictions in PISA 2022, students in Victoria, New South Wales, and South Australia reported higher levels of feeling safe at school than in the other jurisdictions. Students in the highest quarter of the feeling safe index performed at a significantly higher level than students in the lowest quarter. The difference in mean mathematics performance between high and low quarters ranged from 34 to 56 points, while the difference in Victoria was 37 points (De Bortoli et al., 2024).

Recent results from 2024 AtoSS (Victorian Department of Education, 2024) indicated that most students in Years 7 to 9 did not experience racism (78.2%) or bullying (82.2%). However, these proportions declined compared to previous years, by 1.9 and 0.8 percentage points, respectively, indicating that more students experienced racism or bullying in 2024. The rise in the number of students reporting experiences of racism occurred during a period marked by the Voice referendum and ongoing conflict in the Middle East (Victorian Department of Education, 2024). Despite the increase in experiencing bullying or racism, more students in Years 7 to 9 reported that they "know what to do if they experience racism" (61.9%, with a 1.5 percentage point increase).

Additionally, students were invited to report their experiences of cyberbullying in AtoSS. Among students in years 7 to 9, 68.7% reported feeling safe online. This proportion was lower than that of students in Years 4 to 6 (76.3%) and Years 10 to 12 (73.3%), highlighting the need for increased attention to cyberbullying in Years 7 to 9.

3.3.4 School stage transitions

Studies showed that disengagement typically begins as a gradual process rooted in students' early educational experiences (Burridge et al., 2016). Findings from Evans-Whipp et al.'s (2018) study on middle-year students in Melbourne suggest that one in six students disengage from schooling at the end of primary education, resulting in approximately a year's worth of learning loss by the time they start secondary school. These findings point to the importance of fostering student engagement in late primary education. In their study, approximately 13% of students reported specific challenges in transitioning to secondary school, such as navigating peer and teacher relationships and adjusting to changes in their daily routines. This finding corresponds to findings from earlier studies, which highlight broader challenges that students may grapple with as they transition to primary school, such as increased expectations for self-regulated learning (Maguire et al., 2014, as cited in Evans-Whipp et al., 2018) and changes in peer groups and dynamics (West et al., 2010, as cited in Evans-Whipp et al., 2018). Evans-Whipp et al. (2018) cited a report by the Victorian Auditor General (2015) which suggests that in Victoria, many students experience a drop in engagement and achievement levels in lower years of secondary schooling. Based on evidence from international research, this report suggests that students in the early secondary years of schooling are at risk of widening achievement gaps, which can result in further disengagement in later schooling years.

In addition, results reported by Evans-Whipp et al. (2018) showed connections between student gender and difficulties in school transitions. Parent survey results suggest that boys tend to struggle more with the transition to secondary schools than girls. Interestingly, student survey data indicated that girls were somewhat more concerned than boys about transitioning to secondary school. The top three concerns for girls were losing old friends, homework, and getting lost. These concerns were also among the top three reported by boys. Survey data suggest that these concerns reduced substantially once students were in Year 7. However, once in high school, students reported new concerns about discipline and detentions. Overall, findings reaffirm the interrelatedness of student wellbeing, engagement, and learning, highlighting the need for education to address all aspects simultaneously.

3.3.5 Parental involvement

Survey results from Quin et al. (2017) highlighted the positive association between parental support of education and students' levels of engagement in schooling. Findings showed that 15% of variance in cognitive engagement was explained by variables pertaining to individual and parental support in education, including academic grades, gender, parental support, age, and mental health.

In PISA 2022, principals reported parents' involvement in their schools (De Bortoli et al., 2024). Results showed:

- 31% of Victorian students attended schools in which the principal reported that at least 50% of parents "discussed their child's progress with a teacher on their own initiative". The percentage was higher than that the Australian average (29%) but lower than those in the Australian Capital Territory (36%), South Australia (34%), and the Northern Territory (32%).
- 54% of Victorian students attended schools in which the principal reported that at least 50% of parents "discussed their child's progress on the initiative of one of their child's teachers". The percentage was at the same level as the Australian average but lower than those in Australian Capital Territory (66%), Queensland (57%), South Australia (70%), the Northern Territory (58%), and Tasmania (56%).
- 5% of Victorian students attended schools in which the principal reported that over 50% of their parents "volunteered in physical or extra-curricular activities".

The relationship between parental involvement and mathematics performance was also examined in PISA 2022. In Victoria, students whose principals reported higher levels of parental initiative in discussing their child's progress with teachers on their own initiative performed significantly better in mathematics, scoring 25 points higher compared to the lower quarter.

3.4 Behavioural engagement

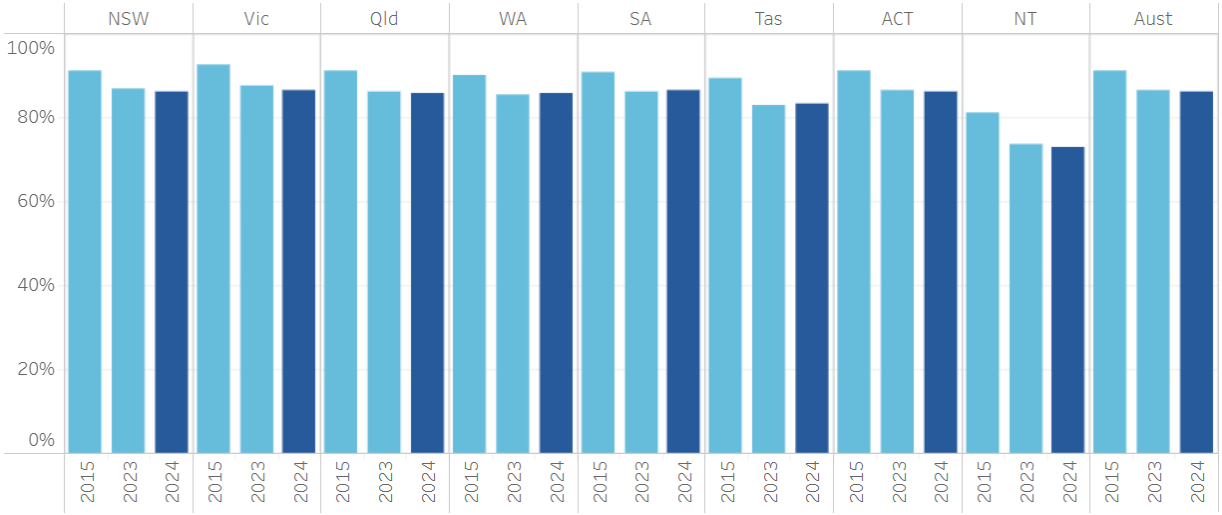
3.4.1 Attendance

Attendance is a key indicator of students' access and participation in school education. In PISA 2022, students were asked whether they had ever missed school for more than three consecutive months during middle school. Among the students in Years 8 and 9, 5% (f = 386) reported that they missed school for three months once or twice or more.

Productivity Commission (2025) and Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2025) reported student attendance rates across all jurisdictions in Australia. Attendance rate in these reports was defined as "the number of actual full-time equivalent student days attended by full-time students in Semester 1 as a percentage of the total number of possible student days attended in Semester 1" (Productivity Commission, 2025, p. 62).

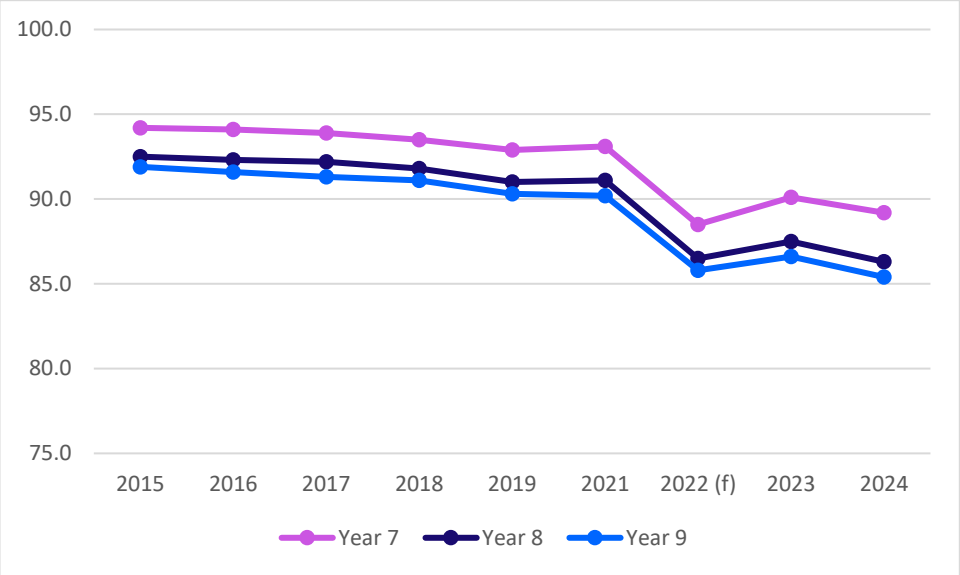
Figure 3 shows the attendance rates of students in Years 7 to 10 across all Australian schools. Nationally, in 2024, attendance rates for these year levels were approximately 86% across all jurisdictions, except for Tasmania and the Northern Territory. While attendance rates remained relatively stable between 2023 and 2024 across all jurisdictions, they showed a decline compared to 2015 levels. In Victoria, the rate for all students in Years 7 to 10 decreased from 92.6% in 2015 to 87.6% in 2023, and 86.5% in 2024.

Figure 3. Student attendance rates of Years 7 to 10 in all Australian schools (Productivity Commission, 2025)



An analysis of the trend from 2015 to 2024 reveals a substantial decline in attendance rates in Victoria, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022 (see Figure 4). For example, the attendance rate for Year 7 students dropped from 93.1% in 2021 to 88.5% in 2022. Although there was a partial recovery in the rates for students in Years 7 to 9 in 2023, the rates declined again in 2024. Additionally, across the investigated years, attendance rates were highest in Year 7 and lowest in Year 9, indicating a consistent downward trend across year levels.

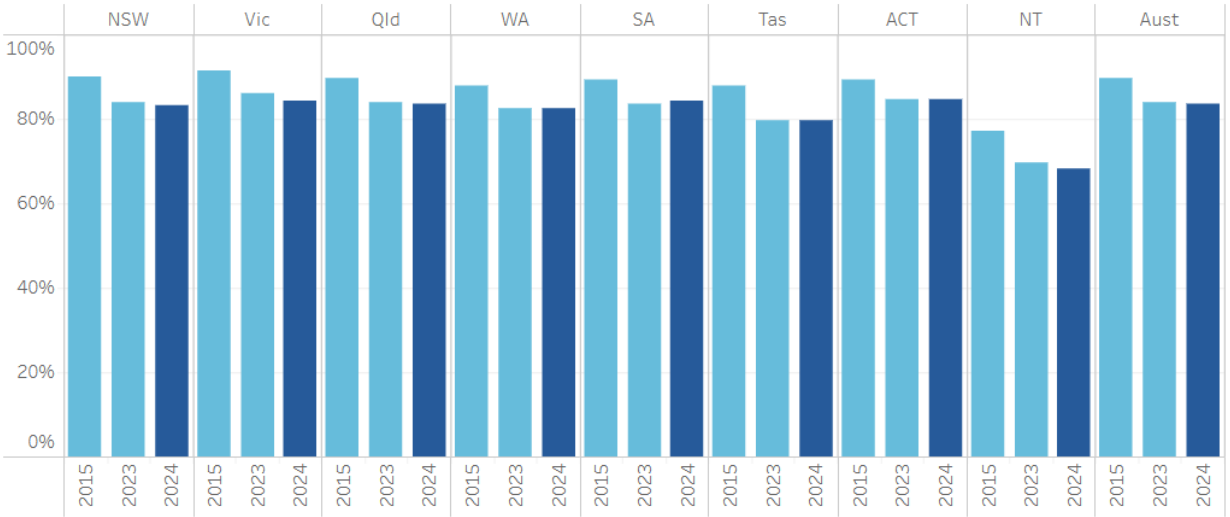
Figure 4. Student attendance rates in Years 7, 8, and 9 in all schools in Victoria between 2015 and 2024 (Table 4A.19, Productivity Commission, 2025)

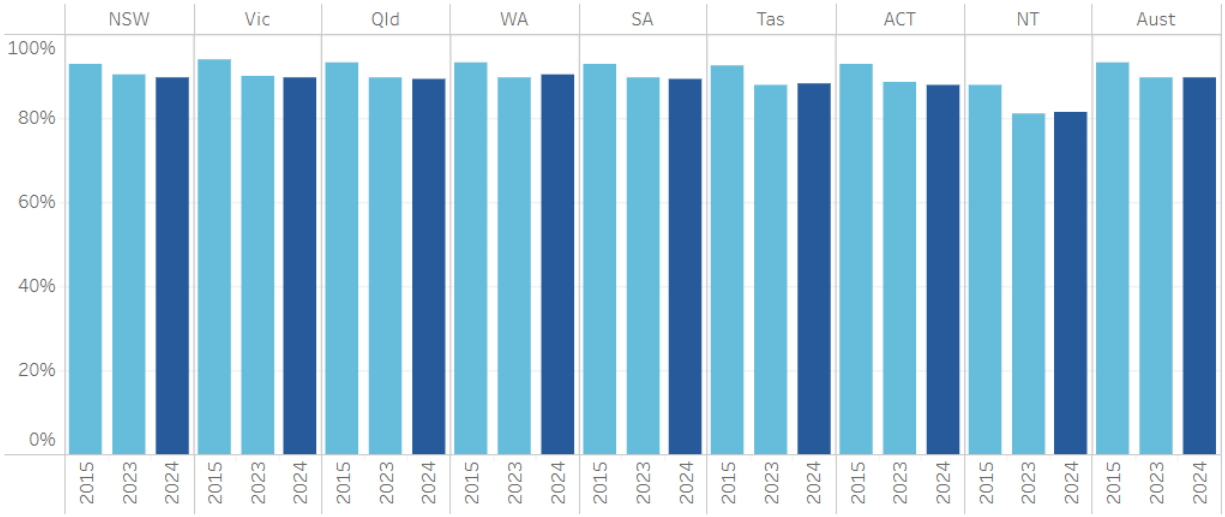


According to the Productivity Commission (2025), attendance rates for students in Years 7 to 10 were higher at non-government schools (89.5%) than in government schools (83.4%) nationally in 2024 (see Figure 5). Among government schools, the Australian Capital Territory, South Australia, and Victoria recorded attendance rates of approximately 84%, which were higher than those in the other jurisdictions in 2024. Between 2023 and 2024, South Australia was the only jurisdiction where the rate for government schools increased. In contrast, the rate in Victoria declined from 85.9% to 84.2%.

Among non-government schools in Australia, attendance rates were higher in independent schools (90.2%) than in Catholic schools (88.7%) in 2024 (ACARA, 2025). Overall, the variation in attendance rates across jurisdictions was smaller for non-government schools than for government schools. In 2024, rates ranged from 81.6% in the Northern Territory to 90.3% in Western Australia. In Victoria, the overall rate for non-government schools was 89.8% (slightly down from 89.9% in 2023), with independent schools at 90.9% and Catholic schools at 88.7%.

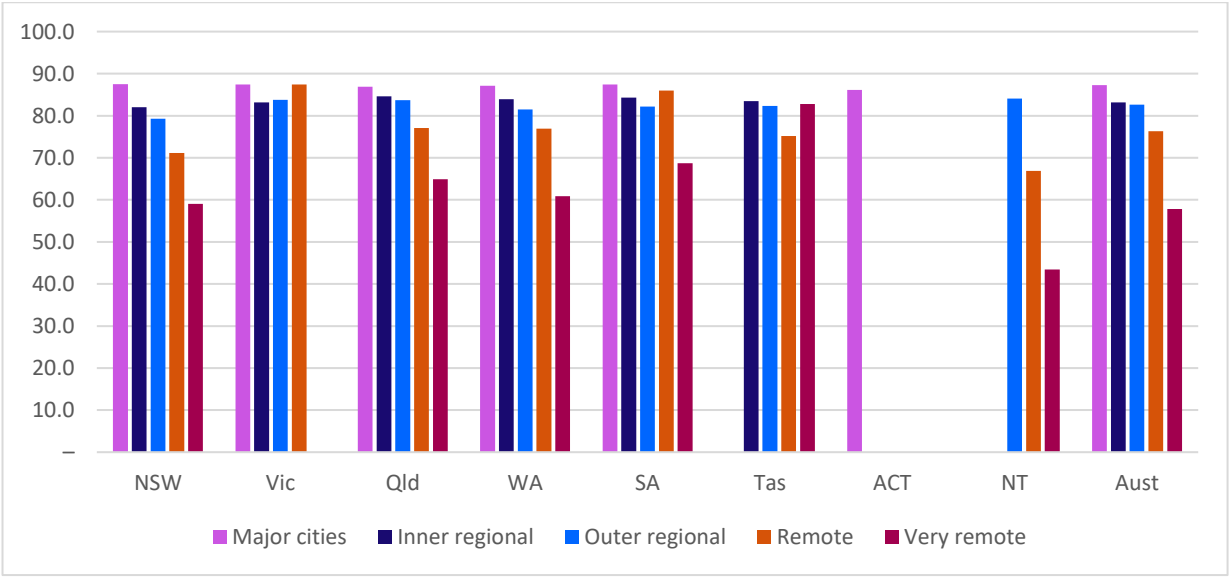
Figure 5. Student attendance rates of Years 7 to 10 in government schools (upper) and non-government schools (below) (Productivity Commission, 2025)





Student attendance rates were also investigated in relation to remoteness (see Figure 6). Nationally, in 2024, attendance rates for students in Years 7 to 10 showed a downward trend from major cities (87.3%) to very remote areas (57.8%). In contrast, in Victoria, the rate for students in major cities and remote areas was the same, at 87.4%. Rates were lower in inner regional and outer regional areas, at 83.2% and 83.8%.

Figure 6. Student attendance rates in Years 7 to 10, by remoteness in 2024 (Table 4A.16, Productivity Commission, 2025)



Attendance rates were also reported by indigenous status. Figure 7 presents the rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-indigenous students in 2024. Across all jurisdictions, attendance rates for non-indigenous students were higher than their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers. The largest gaps were observed in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, while the gap in Victoria was relatively smaller. The attendance disparity tended to widen at higher year levels across jurisdictions. In Victoria, the gap was 10.9% in Year 7, approximately 15% in Year 8, and increased to 16.2% in Year 10.

Figure 77. Student attendance rates by indigenous status in Years 7 to 10 in all schools in 2024 (Productivity Commission, 2025)

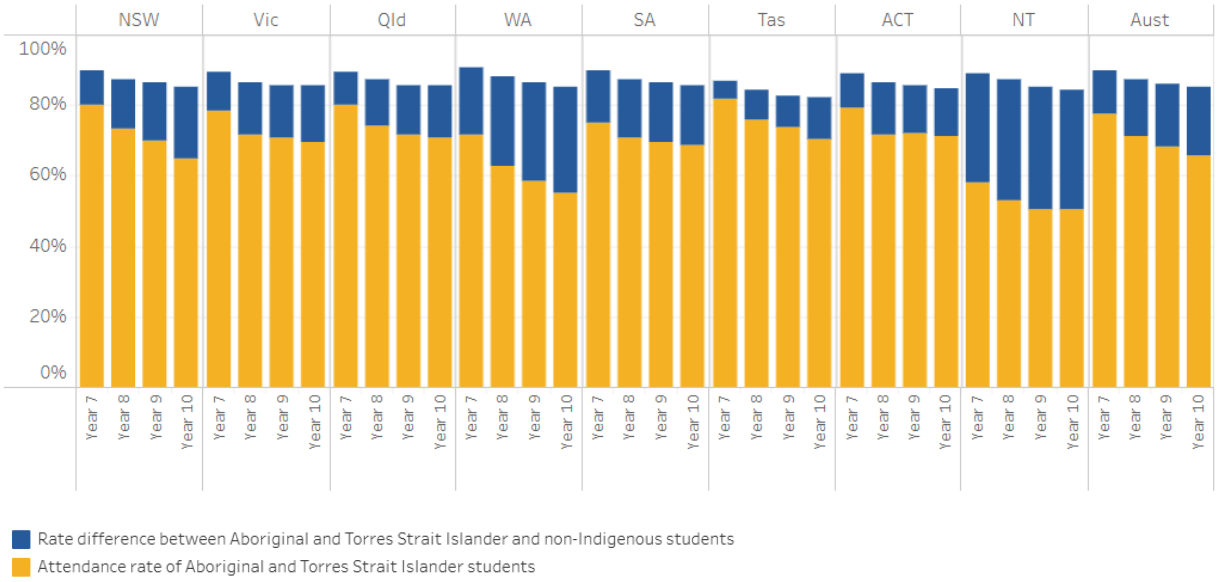
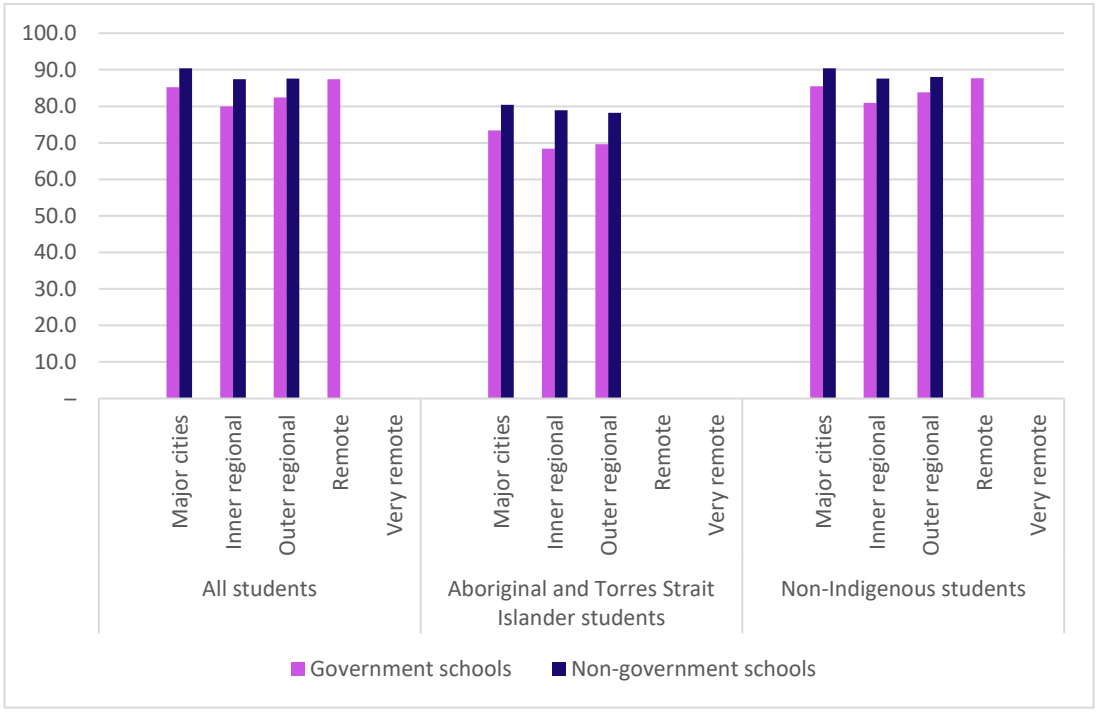


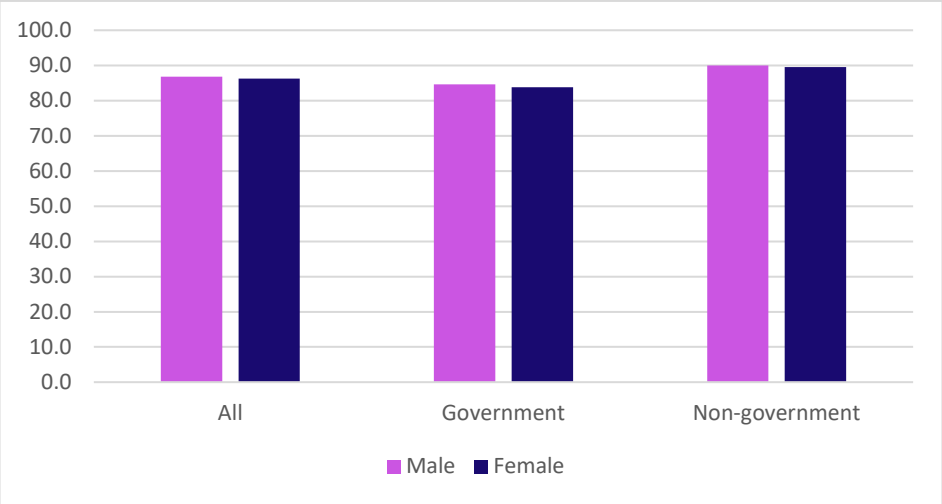
Figure 8 presents student attendance rates for Years 7 to 10 in Victoria in 2024, disaggregated by remoteness, Indigenous status, and school sector. Among all students in these year levels, government schools in inner regional areas recorded the lowest attendance rate, at 80.0%. A similar pattern was also identified for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (68.4%) and non-indigenous students (80.9%) in government schools in these areas. Attendance rates in non-government schools were consistently higher than those in government schools within the same geolocation and indigenous status.

Figure 8. Student attendance rates for Years 7 to 10 in Victoria, by remoteness, indigenous status, and school sector, in 2024 (Table 4A.16, Productivity Commission, 2025)



The National Report on Schooling in Australia (ACARA, 2025) provided further data on attendance rates by gender (see Figure 9). In Victoria in 2024, female students had a lightly lower attendance rate (86.3%) than male students (86.8%). The lowest rate was observed for female students in government schools, at 83.8%, compared to 84.6% for male students in the same school sector.

Figure 9. Attendance rate of students in Years 7 to 10 in Victoria in 2024, by gender (ACARA, 2025)



3.4.2 Suspension and school detachment

In Victorian schools, student suspension decisions are typically based on a perceived risk to the safety of others, including fellow students. Policies and guidelines governing exclusionary practices advise decision-makers to consider individual student circumstances, such as the presence of a disability (Commonwealth of Australia, Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2023).

Data from Victoria showed that suspensions and expulsions increased in the years up to 2017, which resulted in an Ombudsman inquiry (Watterston & O'Connell, 2019). This inquiry identified that among 6,800 disengaged students in Years 9 to 12, some may have been asked to leave school without a formal record of expulsion. Among Victorian disengaged students who were excluded from school, there is an overrepresentation of Indigenous students, students living in out-of-home care, and students with a disability (Victorian Ombudsman, 2017, as cited in Watterston & O'Connell, 2019). Evidence from the Victorian Ombudsman (2017, as cited in Watterston & O'Connell, 2019) also showed that many people in the juvenile justice system had previously been suspended or expelled from school.

Goss and Sonnemann (2017) identified exclusionary practices, such as suspensions, as a last resort strategy for addressing student engagement. They noted that the evidence supporting the effectiveness of these strategies was inconclusive and warned that such practices may lead to further disengagement among students.

Detachment is an extreme form of student disengagement with schooling (Watterston & O'Connell, 2019). Students who are detached simply are not in a school, despite being of compulsory school age. Watterston and O'Connell (2019) called for a need to distinguish between students who are disengaged but on the radar of education systems, and students who have detached and have disappeared. Estimating the size of the detachment problem within Australia is difficult, given the lack of national coordination and tracking mechanisms for students of compulsory education age. Based on

Australian Bureau of Statistics census data from 2016, it was estimated that 3,894 15-year-old students (Year 9 equivalent) were not enrolled in a school or being home-schooled.

Watterston and O'Connell (2019) identify a complex set of interrelated factors that lead to student disengagement and eventual detachment, including a range of risk factors in the students' home context, as well as adverse student mental health, which is a predominant contributing factor. In addition, they highlight problematic practices by mainstream schools that contribute to disengagement, including a lack of support for students in challenging circumstances as well as suspensions and expulsions due to student behaviour. Accountability mechanisms for mainstream schools also further contribute to this matter, as there are limited incentives for schools to enrol and support detached and disengaged students. In the current competitive and narrowly focused educational environment, doing so is often perceived as carrying more risk than benefit (Watterston & O'Connell, 2019).

Further, there are no system-wide mechanisms in place to re-engage students who have detached from schools. While alternative school settings play an important role in helping students re-engage with school and provide a range of supports needed, they often lack the capacity to cater to the large volumes of disengaged students. The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023) reported that there are no apparent policies in Victoria to support students with disability who have been excluded for disciplinary purposes to re-enter school. Watterston and O'Connell (2019) therefore called for better systemic policy responses that aimed at preventing student disengagement detachment from school: "we must intervene earlier to focus on the necessary support and educational adjustments that can meet the complex needs of our most marginalised and disadvantaged" (Watterston & O'Connell, 2019, p. 25).

Watterston and O'Connell (2019) referred to the Victorian Navigator Program (Victorian Department of Education, 2024), which aims to re-engage disengaged secondary students with schooling, aged 12 and up. This program is still operational, and is currently being trialled with younger students, aged 10 and 11[1]. The program is part of the Victorian Government's initiatives to halve the number of students leaving school between years 9 and 12. This initiative reflects a broader commitment to intervention and sustained engagement in an effort to reduce school disengagement and improve long-term educational outcomes. A study tracking the outcomes of this initiative would provide valuable insights for future policy and mechanism development.

[1] https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/navigator-program/policy

4. Conclusion and recommendations

This review identified a range of complementary evidence and data sources relevant to understanding student disengagement in Years 7 to 9 in Victoria. Within this report, the factors that enhance student engagement or are associated with disengagement were organised according to the three interrelated aspects of engagement: cognitive, (socio-)emotional, and behavioural factors. Understanding student disengagement, and its underlying causes, requires consideration of all three.

Despite continued variability in student engagement across cognitive, (socio-)emotional, and behavioural dimensions, there is encouraging evidence of support for cognitive engagement. However, challenges to (socio-)emotional and behavioural engagement remain considerable. While there have been improvements in student–teacher relationships, wellbeing, and sense of belonging in recent years, significant challenges to student engagement persist. The findings also underscore the ongoing need to address bullying, including the growing issue of cyberbullying. In addition, declining attendance rates and the more severe form of disengagement, student detachment, warrant focused attention in research and policy.

A summary of key findings can be found below.

Overview of evidence about student disengagement:

- In combination, evidence sources reviewed suggest that at least one in three Victorian middle years students are disengaged from school.
- Concerns about school and study in Victoria were slightly higher among females compared to males or gender diverse young people. Male and gender diverse young people tend to be less engaged in education compared to their female peers.

Cognitive engagement:

- Students who are not making adequate progress are almost twice as likely to become disengaged from school by Year 7 compared to their peers who are making the most progress.
- There have been improvements in teaching practices and student-teacher relationships in recent years. Despite these improvements, a substantial proportion (around 30 – 40%) of students in Years 7 to 9 still do not report having sufficient teacher support and positive student-teacher relationships.
- A poor disciplinary climate is experienced by one in five students in Victoria, although the evidence is relatively positive overall. The extent to which distractions are caused by the use of digital resources is noteworthy, as it has become one of the primary issues that hinders engagement for students as they progress to Year 10.
- A lack of motivation, poor mental health, and a lack of confidence were ranked as the top three barriers to engagement in schooling reported by young people. Evidence also showed that middle years students experienced challenges with self-regulation, such as task management and planning.
- Low perseverance is a nationwide concern in Australia. In Victoria, less than 30% of students in Years 8 to 9 reported that they finish tasks when these become difficult.

(Socio-)emotional engagement:

- Approximately one in five students in Victoria has persistent emotional or behavioural problems. Particularly alarming are the statistics about gender diverse young people's mental

health, with over three-quarters of young people identifying as gender diverse reporting mental health as a barrier to achieving their study or work goals.
- Although there have been improvements in the health, wellbeing, and sense of belonging among Victorian students, a substantial number still face significant wellbeing challenges and continue to feel disconnected.
- While most Years 7 to 9 students did not report experiences of racism or bullying, slight declines from previous years highlight the need for sustained attention to these issues, including cyberbullying.
- Disengagement typically begins as a gradual process rooted in students' lower years of secondary schooling or even earlier. Boys tend to struggle more with the transition to secondary schools than girls.
- Indicators of parental engagement in education are higher in Victoria is, compared to the Australian average, yet there is room for further improvement in parental engagement to drive student engagement in schooling.

Behavioural engagement:

- The student attendance trend for Years 7 to 9 in Victoria from 2015 to 2024 shows a substantial decline, particularly following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022. Although there was a partial recovery in attendance rates for students in Years 7 to 9 in 2023, the rates declined again in 2024.
- Attendance rates for Victorian students in Years 7 to 10 were higher at non-government schools than in government schools in 2024. Attendance rates for non-indigenous students were higher than their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers. The rate for students in major cities and remote areas was the same, while rates were lower in inner regional and outer regional areas.
- It was estimated that 3,894 15-year-old students (Year 9 equivalent) in Australia were not enrolled in a school or being home-schooled, based on Australian Bureau of Statistics census data from 2016. Data from Victoria showed that among 6,800 disengaged students in Years 9 to 12, some may have been asked to leave school without a formal record of expulsion.

This report provides initial insights into student disengagement in Years 7 to 9 in Victoria. We recommend undertaking further research to generate more in-depth understandings building on the findings reported here.

Recommendations

1. Expand data sources
    - Conduct further analysis of PISA 2022 data, disaggregated by demographic groups (e.g., gender, school sector, and socioeconomic background) to identify further evidence about specific groups at risk of disengagement.
    - Explore the recently released *TIMSS 2023 Volume II* report for additional insights, especially related to student engagement in mathematics and science.
    - Explore findings from *TALIS* 2024 (initial results to be released in October 2025) on classroom disciplinary climate and teacher-reported disruptive behaviours to triangulate student perceptions data.

2. Undertake additional longitudinal analyses
    - Analyse data sources over time, to better understand trends in student engagement, and wellbeing and learning over time and across cohorts. For example, obtaining access to AtoSS would enable further analyses. Additional data analyses, for example comparing PISA and TIMSS results over time, may also contribute further insights into trends.
3. Advocate for targeted and early interventions
    - Advocate for the design and implementation of early intervention strategies in secondary schools, guided by risk indicators identified during primary schooling, as recommended by Evans-Whipp et al. (2018).
    - Encourage targeted professional learning that builds teacher capability in identifying and responding to emerging, and potentially subtle, signs of student disengagement.
4. Advocate for strategies to prevent and reverse student disengagement, especially for at-risk students
    - Advocate for developing target attendance improvement strategies and improve re-engagement mechanisms and polices, including support and re-engagement pathways for students returning from long absences or suspension.
    - Advocate for further research and policy intervention to prevent disengagement for students at risk, such as those in marginalised student groups or grappling with mental health issues.
5. Undertake further research to identify rich evidence
    - Undertake primary research to enable holistic investigation of student engagement across cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural dimensions, to complement evidence from data and evidence sources available to date. Insights from such research can inform the development of policy recommendations for targeted and sustained strategies to lift student engagement.

By combining rich datasets with targeted interventions and more refined measures of engagement, education systems can better support students through these critical middle years and reduce the long-term risks associated with disengagement.

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