



INSTITUTE FOR
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REFORM

Voice, Choice, and Belonging – Understanding and responding to student disengagement in Victoria’s schools

Dr Fiona Longmuir of Monash University draws on Australian and international research to examine what drives student disengagement in Victoria’s middle years schools. Commissioned by the Institute for Educational Reform, the paper makes the case that belonging, aspiration, and student voice, choice and agency are not optional extras – they are the foundations of engagement that Victorian policy is increasingly leaving behind.

Engagement is more than just showing up

Student engagement has three dimensions: behavioural (what students do), cognitive (how deeply they think), and emotional (how connected and valued they feel). Research shows that of these three, emotional engagement comes first and the others follow. When students feel safe, seen and genuinely connected to their teachers and peers, cognitive and behavioural engagement follow. When they do not, no amount of instructional rigour will compensate.

Yet Victoria’s current teaching and learning policy is narrowing toward cognitive and instructional priorities at the expense of the relational and emotional dimensions that evidence shows matter most, particularly in the middle years.

What students are actually experiencing

50% Half of all mental health problems have their onset by age 14, precisely when students are navigating the transition to secondary school.

99% Almost all young Australians report feeling anxious or pessimistic about their futures.

79% Nearly four in five young people believe they will be financially worse off than their parents.

The transition from primary to secondary school is one of the most significant and disruptive events in a young person’s life. Students arrive into larger, more complex environments at exactly the moment they are most developmentally vulnerable.

What actually drives engagement

The research points to three things schools cannot afford to deprioritise:

Belonging — Students who feel accepted, valued and connected to teachers and peers are more motivated, more resilient, and less likely to disengage. Strong teacher-student relationships are paramount to this.

Aspiration — Students engage when school feels connected to a future they can imagine and want. This means moving away from rigid traditions and offering learning experiences that equip students with the navigational tools to envision and reach their preferred futures

Voice, choice and agency — Students who have meaningful input into what and how they learn show higher engagement across all three dimensions. Education must shift from something done to students, to something done with them.

To download the full report go to www.educationalreform.org.au

