INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Middle years engagement

Innovative School Models in Years 7–9

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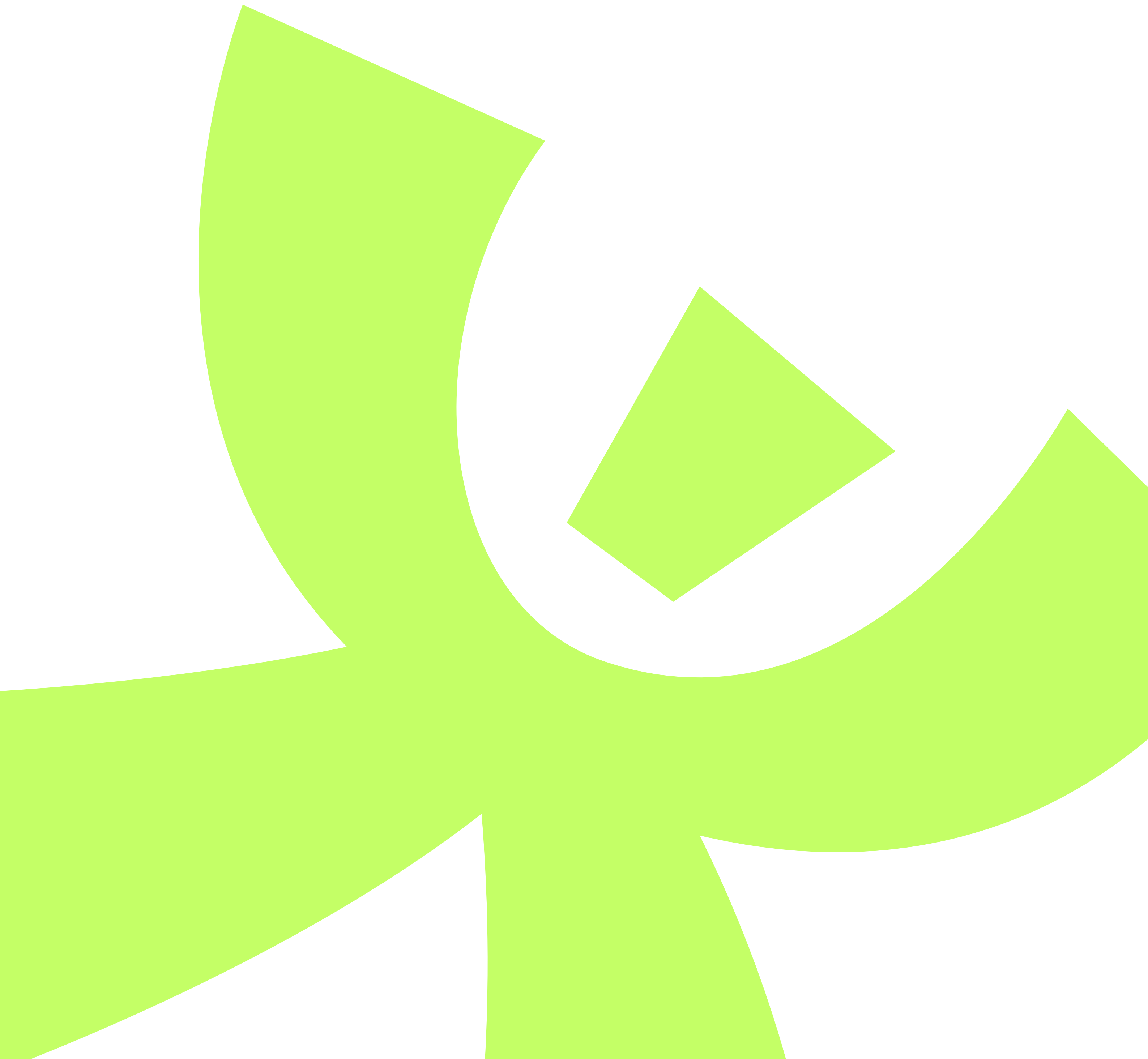
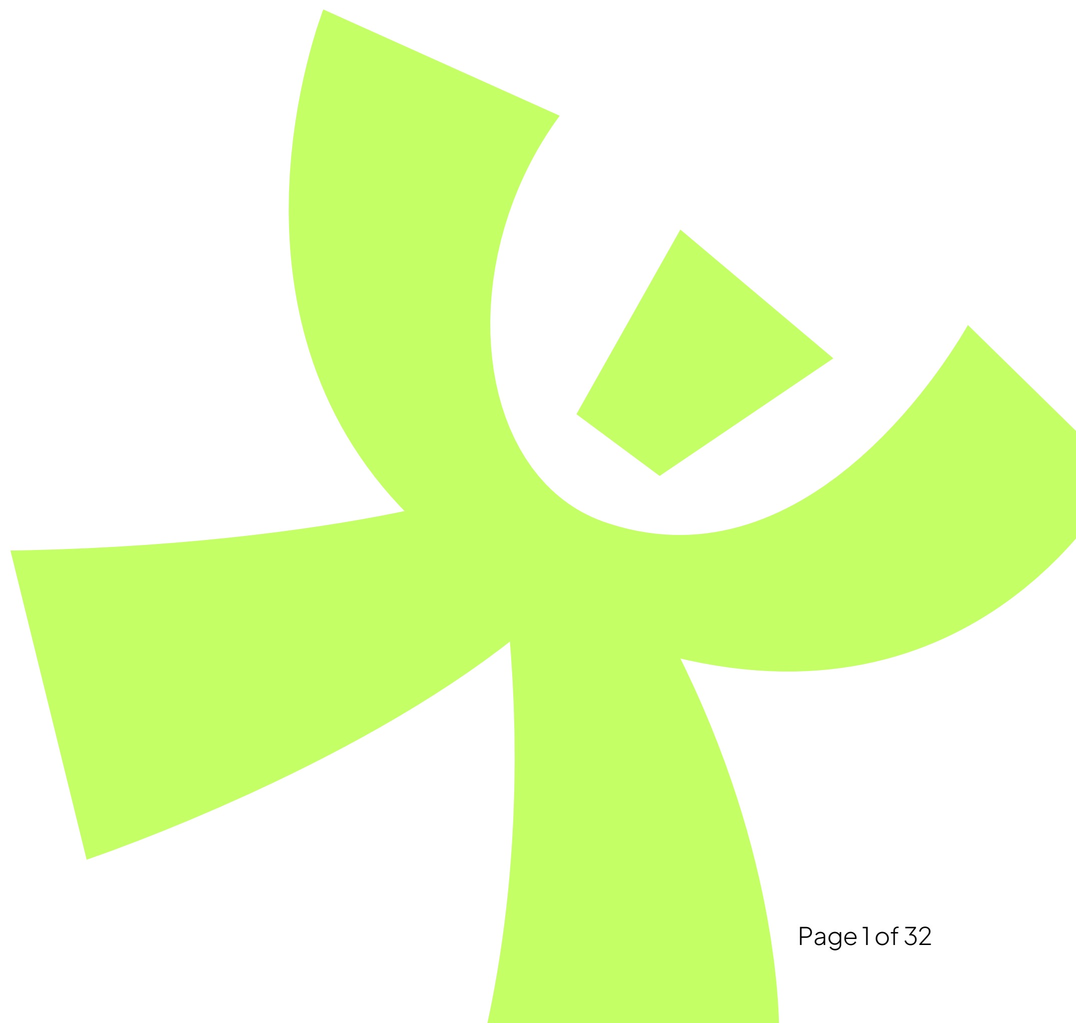
Commissioned by: Institute for Educational Reform



Acknowledgements

This report was made possible by the generosity of the schools that shared their time, data and perspectives. The author is grateful to the school leaders and staff who accommodated visits and responded to enquiries. Thanks also to the Institute for Educational Reform for commissioning this work, and to colleagues who provided feedback on earlier drafts.



Executive Summary

The middle years of secondary schooling (Years 7-9) are widely identified as a period of heightened risk for student disengagement. Around one in three Victorian middle-years students show signs of disengagement from school (van der Kleij et al., 2025). This disengagement occurs within a broader context of student stress and pressure associated with schooling. Survey data indicate that school or study problems are the most commonly reported source of stress among Victorian young people, with 57 per cent reporting stress related to school or study in the past year (McHale et al., 2025). Consistent with this pattern, research exploring adolescent engagement in Australian secondary schools found that approximately half of students were classified as "striving" rather than "thriving" in relation to key engagement factors such as future orientation, planning, role models and social belonging (Bowles et al., 2022). Attendance patterns reinforce these concerns. Victorian attendance rates for students in Years 7-10 have declined from around 92-93 per cent in the mid-2010s to around 86-87 per cent in recent years, with rates yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels (ACARA, 2024). Collectively, these indicators suggest that a substantial proportion of early secondary students experience school as a source of pressure rather than connection.

Commissioned by the Institute for Educational Reform, this report draws on desktop research, publicly available data (My School profiles, NAPLAN, attendance, retention, post-school destinations, Attitudes to School Survey, school annual reports), and stakeholder conversations. While all schools in this study were approached, only two were able to accommodate visits. The aim of the study is not to rank schools but to document approaches that illustrate how existing policy flexibility may support innovation, as noted in the 2024 Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the State Education System (Parliament of Victoria, 2024). Detailed case study profiles are published separately by the Institute for Educational Reform. This report draws across those profiles to identify common patterns, tensions and implications for middle years reform.

Across the schools explored, several common features emerge. Schools that aim to strengthen student engagement frequently provide meaningful opportunities for student agency, flexible learning pathways that move beyond age-based progression, sustained mentoring relationships that support belonging, and broader definitions of success that position vocational and applied pathways as legitimate outcomes. Leadership commitment and community trust play important roles in enabling reform. Government schools in this report, including Templestowe College, Bundoora Secondary College, Wodonga Middle Years College, The Pavilion School and Bayside P-12 College, indicate that innovation is possible within standard Victorian policy and funding frameworks.

At the same time, the schools raise several important questions and considerations. Among government schools that have removed age-based structures, wellbeing survey data presents a mixed picture. Some schools report connectedness and bullying-management measures below state averages, while others report levels above comparable schools. These

patterns suggest that changes to school organisation may not automatically produce stronger student belonging, and that local context, implementation and the student cohort must be considered carefully.

Attendance also remains a persistent challenge in some models explored in this study. Evidence that these changes have improved engagement or learning outcomes is available for some schools but not all, and conventional attendance measures may not fully capture the broader re-engagement work these schools are undertaking. Resourcing is also a recurring challenge. Several of the models documented depend on staffing arrangements, specialist roles or program structures that require either additional funding or a different distribution of existing resources. Further research, particularly classroom observation, would be needed to understand whether learning and teaching practices within these models differ substantively from conventional approaches.

The report also identifies several complexities in the policy environment. While school autonomy is an explicit feature of the Victorian system, accountability frameworks remain largely oriented around conventional age-graded structures, and recent policy directions have emphasised greater prescription in teaching and curriculum delivery. The schools in this report have drawn on existing policy flexibility and their own leadership and community relationships to make innovation possible. There may be opportunities at a system level to make this easier for more schools, by clarifying the scope of autonomy available, sharing what has been learned from schools that have used it effectively, and ensuring that accountability frameworks can accommodate diverse models of schooling.

A further question concerns the depth of intellectual engagement and student agency. While several schools provide students with structural choices over pathways, subjects or mentoring relationships, it is less clear to what extent students are the primary drivers of their learning programs. Determining whether these models lead to deeper forms of intellectual engagement would require further research, particularly classroom-level observation of teaching and learning practices.

Technology, including adaptive software and generative AI, raises its own set of questions for middle years schooling, but the schools in this report suggest that relationships, belonging, breadth of experience and credible evidence about outcomes remain central to how schools support student engagement, regardless of what tools are available.

This report approaches middle years innovation on the understanding that success in schooling cannot be reduced to a single set of conventional indicators. Attendance, retention, NAPLAN and senior secondary results remain important, but they do not fully capture the forms of growth many schools in this study are trying to support, including belonging, agency, confidence, persistence, relational trust, intellectual engagement, and the development of meaningful pathways. By documenting a range of approaches, outcomes, challenges and open questions, it aims to support constructive discussion among educators, policymakers and researchers about how middle years schooling might evolve to better recognise student engagement, growth and diverse learning pathways.

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1 Introduction and Policy Context Background and context

The middle years of secondary schooling (Years 7–9) are widely recognised as a period in which student engagement, motivation and school attachment often decline (Fredricks et al., 2004; Berry, 2022). The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration identifies this stage of schooling as the time when students are “at the greatest risk of disengagement from learning” (Education Council, 2019, p. 9). The transition from primary school, the developmental changes associated with adolescence, and the increasing complexity of secondary schooling environments combine to create a period of heightened challenge for many young people.

Student engagement is not a single or simple construct. Educational research commonly conceptualises engagement as involving behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions, with emotional engagement often acting as a precursor to the other dimensions (Longmuir, 2025). Behavioural engagement refers to participation, attendance and effort; emotional engagement relates to belonging, connection and attitudes towards school; and cognitive engagement refers to students’ investment in learning, their willingness to persist, and their capacity to regulate their own thinking.

Victorian and national data reflect these patterns, as outlined in the Executive Summary. Among the indicators most relevant to this report, around half of Victorian students in Years 7–9 report a sense of belonging at school, a figure that has improved only slightly in recent years, from 48 per cent in 2023 to 50.2 per cent in 2025 (Victorian Department of Education, 2024). While these measures do not capture the full complexity of student engagement, they suggest that a substantial proportion of young people experience schooling during these years as disconnected from their interests, abilities or aspirations. For many young people, the challenge is not simply turning up and complying, but whether school feels relevant to their lives, interests and possible futures. A further question is whether students understand why their learning is worth doing in the first place.

Disengagement is not uniform across students. In any given year level, the most advanced learners may be “five to six years ahead of the least advanced students” (Gonski et al., 2018, p. ix). Some students disengage because learning lacks challenge, while others struggle because it is inaccessible (Burridge et al., 2016; Evans-Whipp et al., 2017). Students who are not making adequate academic progress are significantly more likely to become disengaged by Year 7 compared with peers making stronger progress, regardless of their starting achievement level (Evans-Whipp et al., 2017).

Policy responses to middle years disengagement have often focused on improving teaching practice, strengthening behaviour management and providing targeted supports for students experiencing difficulty. While these approaches can be valuable, research increasingly suggests that the organisation of schooling itself may also influence engagement. The Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the State Education System noted that schools operate

with significant autonomy in areas such as curriculum implementation, pedagogy and school organisation, highlighting the potential importance of how schooling is structured in shaping learning experiences (Parliament of Victoria, 2024). Conventional secondary schooling structures group students by age, often move them through the curriculum at a similar pace, and organise learning through subject-based timetables. In practice, however, students of the same age often differ widely in readiness, interests and learning pathways.

This report does not suggest that structural innovation is the single or primary solution to middle years disengagement. Rather, it explores structural, pedagogical and relational change as a set of responses among several, alongside wellbeing supports, curriculum design, student voice and broader social factors. It focuses on schools that have reorganised aspects of how students are grouped, how teaching and learning are designed, how learning pathways are structured, and how relationships between students and adults are sustained.

A further implication is that middle years innovation involves academic, social and developmental dimensions. Some of the most distinctive models explored in this report respond to disengagement by redesigning the social conditions of schooling itself. Programs such as Marshmead and Clunes are residential initiatives that place students in small community-living environments, where cooking, shared decision-making, conflict resolution and responsibility for others become part of the curriculum. These approaches suggest that, for some adolescents, growth in responsibility, confidence, independence, belonging and contribution may be central educational outcomes rather than peripheral benefits. Anecdotal accounts from students suggest that these experiences were among the most memorable of their secondary schooling, even where formal measures showed no sustained change in learning outcomes upon return to school. These models suggest that contemporary schooling needs to recognise personal and social development more deliberately as part of the curriculum, rather than treating it as incidental to academic learning.

What remains less well understood is how these ideas operate in practice within existing public education systems. While a number of schools in Australia and internationally have experimented with alternative structures for organising learning, there is relatively little accessible documentation of how these models function in day-to-day school settings, how they are experienced by students and teachers, and how they interact with policy and accountability frameworks. Exploring concrete examples of schools that have reorganised aspects of schooling provides an opportunity to consider how structural, pedagogical and relational approaches may work together to support engagement in the middle years.

What the Victorian System Allows

Two findings from the 2024 Parliamentary Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria are particularly relevant to this report. First, the Inquiry confirmed that school autonomy and decentralised administration are key features of the Victorian government school system (Parliament of Victoria, 2024, p. 16). School leaders therefore have considerable flexibility in curriculum implementation and program design within the broad requirements of the Victorian Curriculum.

Second, the Inquiry noted that the Victorian Curriculum is structured around learning bands and achievement levels rather than strictly by age cohort (Parliament of Victoria, 2024, p. 35). In principle, this enables schools to organise learning in ways that respond to students' actual levels of readiness and progress rather than chronological age.

These findings suggest that the age-based grouping dominant in most secondary schools is a longstanding practice rather than a formal requirement of the curriculum framework. This report documents schools that have made different organisational choices and explores how those choices have shaped access to learning, student experience and pathways through schooling.

At the same time, all Victorian government schools are required to deliver the Victorian Curriculum F-10 across eight learning areas as a condition of registration, regardless of any additional programs or frameworks they may offer (Victorian Department of Education, 2024b; VRQA, 2024). The flexibility described above therefore operates within a defined curriculum framework. The schools considered in this report work within these parameters; their innovation lies in how they organise access to learning, progression through the curriculum, student choice, and the support structures that enable these processes.

2 Scope, Analytical Framework and Method

This report was commissioned by the Institute for Educational Reform. Its purpose is to document examples of schools that have introduced innovations in middle years schooling (Years 7–9) and to make these examples available to educators, policymakers and researchers interested in how this phase of schooling might better engage students. The report is also intended as a resource for teacher educators, school leaders and policymakers seeking concrete examples of how middle years schooling can be reorganised around engagement, belonging, agency and broader forms of student growth.

The report aims to:

- document a range of school-level innovations in middle years education
- present a structured comparison of schools and cross-case analysis of how these models operate in practice
- identify patterns, enablers and key challenges across different school contexts
- contribute to discussion among educators, policymakers and researchers about how middle years schooling might evolve to better engage students.

The report is not intended as a ranking or evaluation of schools. It documents a set of illustrative examples that expand the range of models currently visible in Victorian and international schooling. These cases should not be understood as equivalent models or as responses to disengagement of the same kind. They represent different approaches to

school design, learner engagement and re-engagement, operating in different sectors, policy contexts and student populations. Their value in this report lies not in direct comparability, but in the way they make visible a range of structural, pedagogical and relational responses to the challenge of middle years engagement.

Each school is considered across three interconnected dimensions: structural organisation, pedagogical practice and relational culture. Structural organisation refers to how students, time and learning pathways are arranged. Pedagogical practice refers to how teaching and learning are designed and enacted. Relational culture refers to how schools build connection, belonging and sustained support for students. This framing reflects scholarship on educational change, which suggests that school reform is shaped not only by what is taught, but also by how learning is organised, how teaching is enacted, and how relationships are sustained within schools (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Noddings, 2012; Pendergast, 2024).

Student engagement in this report is understood through three interrelated dimensions widely used in educational research: behavioural engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioural engagement refers to participation in school activities, including attendance, effort and involvement in learning tasks. Emotional engagement relates to students' sense of belonging, interest and attitudes toward school and learning. Cognitive engagement refers to students' investment in understanding complex ideas, persisting through challenge, and regulating their own learning. These dimensions are interconnected. Students who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to participate actively, while students who experience meaningful intellectual challenge are more likely to sustain motivation over time.

Engagement is therefore understood as something shaped by the design of learning environments, relationships and school structures. As Berry (2022) observes, the term "engagement" is often understood differently by teachers, researchers and policymakers. Berry identifies a continuum of engagement ranging from active disruption to compliant participation, to students driving their own learning. This distinction matters for interpreting the evidence from schools in this report. For example, improvements in attendance do not automatically indicate deeper cognitive investment in learning.

The schools in this report were explored using a combination of evidence sources, including school visits and stakeholder conversations where access was granted, school websites, My School data, annual reports, published media and government documents. The school comparison table and cross-case analysis consider each school in relation to its structural organisation, pedagogical practice, relational culture, evidence of impact, and key enabling conditions and challenges. Detailed case study profiles are published separately by the Institute for Educational Reform and should be read alongside this report.

These sources provide useful contextual and comparative information, but they also have limitations. My School and NAPLAN data capture some important outcomes, but not the full range of learning, belonging and growth that these schools may value. In some settings, particularly those working with students who have previously disengaged, growth in confidence, participation, agency or pathway continuity may be as significant as performance

on conventional indicators. ICSEA is included to contextualise the socio-educational profile of each school community, not as a proxy for school quality.

This report documents how schools are organised and how relationships and pathways are structured. It does not include sustained classroom observation, detailed analysis of student work, or interviews across whole school communities. As a result, it cannot evaluate the quality of pedagogy within these models or determine with confidence where students sit on the engagement continuum in practice. This is a limitation of the research design rather than a criticism of the schools, and it points to the kind of research that would strengthen future evaluation of these models.

Schools included in this report were identified through professional networks and published examples of innovation in the middle years. These cases should therefore be understood as illustrative examples of what is possible, rather than representative of middle years schooling.

3 School Comparison Overview

The table below provides a high-level comparison of all schools included in this study. It is designed for rapid comparison and as a reference point for discussion, with detailed case study profiles published separately by the Institute for Educational Reform. Each dimension is explored further in the cross-case analysis that follows.

Victorian Schools

School	Structural Changes	Pedagogical Changes	Relational Changes	Evidence	Enablers
Templestowe College	No year levels; mixed-age classes across Years 7–12; flexible pace (4–8 years); VCE access at any age when ready	150+ electives generated by student demand; Individualised Learning Programs co-created with parents/staff; Expanded Measures of Success framework	Connect Mentor system across multiple years; four Community teams; "Yes is the default" principle	Enrolment growth from 300 to 1,250; retention 79.5% (above state average); 81% post-school destination; Australian Government Secondary School of the Year 2023	Near-closure in 2010 created licence for redesign; long-term principal leadership; Victorian Curriculum flexibility
Bundoora Secondary College	PACE21 vertical pathways across Years 8–10; scaffolded Year 7 Entry Year; acceleration into senior subjects available	Personalised Learning Plans with PAL mentors; core English/Maths retained; interdisciplinary electives; project-based learning	PAL mentoring system; HUB centre for targeted support; Sub School Leaders; "Yes is the default" principle	97.7% post-school destination; connectedness (45.7%) above similar schools; parent satisfaction 81.3% (above state); attracts students who haven't experienced success elsewhere	Clear principal vision since 2019; capital investment in new learning environments; explicit valuing of vocational pathways
Woodleigh Schoo	Small multi-year Homestead communities; bushland campus as learning environment; no uniform	IB Middle Years Programme; inquiry-based progression; Regenerative Futures Program (Year 10); sequenced challenge (Outward Bound, City Bound, Hattah)	Homestead model with sustained staff relationships; Three Respects framework	Stable enrolment (~900–1,000); strong VCE/IB results (Dux ATAR 99.25); IB World School accreditation; New Metrics partnership	Independent governance; sustained philosophical continuity; moderate school size; ICSEA 1116

Global Village Learning	Multi-age Developmental Learning Hubs replace year levels; four-week sprint cycles; daily rhythm replaces conventional timetable	Design-thinking sprints; personalised learning plans co-constructed with families twice per term; public Edventure Week exhibitions	Adults as Guides; multi-age peer learning; family involvement structurally embedded; "Yes is the default" principle	197 students; second campus planned (Castlemaine 2026); AISSA masterclass hosted 2025	Independent governance; small scale; Peter Hutton leadership (formerly Templestowe); 10-acre campus
Hester Hornbrook Academy	Year-round enrolment; flexible start times; hybrid attendance; multidisciplinary classroom teams (teacher + youth worker + intervention specialist)	VPC and VCE VM pathways; embedded literacy/numeracy intervention; applied learning; HOPE framework	Youth worker in every classroom; restorative practice; domestic campus design; breakfast and lunch; allied health integrated	75% post-school transition; enrolment growth from 170 to 701; persistent waitlist of 150+; $3.6M government funding for Living Learning	Melbourne City Mission integration; Specialist Assistance School funding; fee-free; multidisciplinary workforce (125 FTE non-teaching)
The Pavilion School	Multi-age classes of ~20; teacher-youth worker-educational support triads; year-round referral; sub-campus of Charles La Trobe P–12 College	Five-phase instructional model; explicit literacy/numeracy intervention; trauma-informed practice integrated with structured academic teaching	Multi-year teacher continuity; daily circle practice; non-punitive approach; Koori Programs Team and dedicated Koori Hub; pathways partnerships	Waitlist since 2007; growth from 20 to 220 students; Victorian Education Excellence Awards 2009	Founding leadership continuity; integration within CLTC; documented instructional model; Koori Programs
Preshil	IB MYP in middle years; Senior Studio from Year 9; no uniform	Inquiry-based; creative and performing arts as core; multi-age electives	Small cohort; high adult-to-student contact; learning through making and performing	Enrolment ~200; high ICSEA; reintroduction of VCE alongside IB	Long-established progressive philosophy; independent governance; IB authorisation
Carey Baptist Grammar	Dedicated Middle School precinct; 50+ electives in Years 8–9; Carey Zero for Year 10 (classes capped at 15); three-week Zero Journey expedition	Challenge and Choice philosophy; Robinson River partnership (Year 9 Indigenous Studies); Year 10 repositioned as developmental bridge	Cross-age Mentor Groups sustained across three middle years; dedicated Zero Mentor for Year 10	Strong ATAR and IB results; 54 VCE study scores of 40+ in 2024; ATAR 99.90 in 2025	Large enrolment base (2,564); substantial fee revenue; multi-campus infrastructure; dual credential pathways (IB and VCE)

Wodonga Middle Years College	Standalone Years 7–9 college (created through 2006 system restructure); neighbourhood campus model; House structure; federated pathway with senior college	AVID from Year 8; Academic Advancement Program; targeted literacy/numeracy supports; Student-Led Conferences and portfolios	CARE teacher as primary pastoral connection; restorative practices; SWPBS	Year 7 reading near state average despite ICSEA 939; multiple improvement strategies documented transparently	System-level restructure (2006); federated pathway design; CARE model; layered academic supports
Overnewton Anglican Community College	Four-schools-within-one model; separate Year 9 Centre at Canowindra campus; staged expansion of choice from Year 8	Core curriculum plus Learning Choices electives; Focus Weeks; formal reflection subject ("It's a WRAP")	Dedicated leadership and pastoral structures per division; restorative practices; Home Groups	ATAR 99.90 in 2025; 54 study scores of 40+ across diverse subjects	Year 9 Centre since 1998; purpose-built environments; 43% LBOTE community; historically high family participation
Bayside P–12 College	Three-campus stage design; specialist Williamstown middle school campus (Years 7–9); pathway differentiation within government setting	Voyager Program (Years 7–10); New Metrics for Success partnership with University of Melbourne; capability-focused learning	Campus Principal model; SWPBS; localised wellbeing structures	Stable enrolment; distinctive program offerings for government sector; New Metrics partnership	Multi-campus design; university partnership; specialist pathways (Academic Achievers; Tennis School); high multilingual community

International Schools

School	Structural Changes	Pedagogical Changes	Relational Changes	Evidence	Enablers
Bedales School (UK)	Blocks rather than year groups; Block 3 (Year 9) as foundational year with no external exams	Bedales Assessed Courses replace GCSEs (since 2006; expanding to near-complete replacement by 2027); Outdoor Work as graded subject; cross-curricular projects	First-name culture; School Council since 1916; weekly whole-school Jaw; nightly handshaking ritual; mixed-year boarding	Over two-thirds of grades at 9–7; Edufuturists Independent School of the Year 2024; students progress to Oxbridge and Russell Group	132-year institutional history; 120-acre campus as curriculum infrastructure; mature BAC framework; horizontal community culture
High Tech High (USA)	16-school public charter network; schools deliberately small (400–500); zip-code lottery admission; no streaming or tracking	Project-based learning as primary pedagogy; no AP/IB/textbooks; teacher as curriculum designer; exhibition-based assessment and portfolios	15-student advisory groups; longitudinal advisor relationships; community internships; authentic audiences for student work	~95% meet California A–G requirements; ~80% enter college; 5:1 applicant ratio; 2019 WISE Prize for Education	Tuition-free public charter status; California charter legislation; embedded graduate school and teacher residency; extensive public documentation
Alpha School (USA)	Academics compressed to 2 hours/day via adaptive AI software; afternoon life skills workshops; 5:1 student-guide ratio	Mastery-based (90% threshold before advancing); 24 life skills framework delivered experientially; no conventional teacher role (Guides)	Guide mentoring; 30 min weekly one-on-one; incentive-based motivation (time rewards, cash payments)	Claims 2.6x faster learning on MAP Growth (internal data only; no independent verification)	~$1B committed by founder; political alignment with US school choice movement; adaptive learning built on established learning science

Note: The cross-case analysis that follows draws on these schools to identify patterns, enablers and challenges across different contexts.

4 Cross-Case Insights

4.1 Looking across the cases

Although the schools included in this report vary widely in sector, size, governance and student population, several patterns emerge across the schools in this report. These patterns do not point to a single model of middle years reform. Instead, they suggest that schools are using a range of levers to support engagement, including structural redesign, relational continuity, student agency, broader pathways and, less visibly, changes to pedagogy and assessment. The themes below draw on the structural, pedagogical and relational dimensions used in the school comparison, but also reflect cross-school patterns relating to student agency, definitions of success, evidence, equity and the policy environment.

The schools fall broadly into four groups. Some have redesigned the structure of schooling itself by removing year levels and reorganising learning around individual pathways. Others have introduced significant reforms within more conventional structures, retaining year levels while expanding elective choice, mentoring systems, and dedicated middle years environments. A third group focuses specifically on re-engagement for students who have already disengaged from mainstream schooling. The international schools are included as comparative reference points.

Despite their diversity, several features recur across these schools. Middle years education is no longer treated simply as a continuation of primary school taught by subject specialists. Instead, schools deliberately design structures that recognise early adolescence as a distinct developmental stage. Each school includes mechanisms to ensure that students are known well by at least one consistent adult across multiple years, most commonly through advisory systems, mentoring programs or small learning communities.

Student choice is also a consistent feature. Whether through electives, personalised pathways or project-based learning, students are given greater scope to shape their learning than in conventional secondary schools. Many schools describe their pedagogy in terms of inquiry, projects or applied learning rather than traditional methods, although, as noted earlier, this report cannot independently verify how these approaches translate into everyday classroom practice.

Finally, sustained leadership emerges as a common enabling condition. In most cases the reforms described here have been driven by principals or founding leaders with a clear commitment to change, often maintained over many years.

Across these different groups, several recurring levers for middle years redesign emerge. These are not mutually exclusive categories and many schools combine multiple levers in different ways.

4.2 Structural redesign levers

A central feature across many of the schools is some form of departure from age-based

cohort structures. Templestowe College removed year levels entirely. Bundoora's PACE21 allows students to select subjects across Years 8-10 by readiness rather than age. GVL replaces the conventional timetable with developmental hubs. Wodonga was created as a standalone middle years college. These approaches recognise that in any given year level, the most advanced students are typically five to six years ahead of the least advanced (Gonski et al., 2018). By organising learning more flexibly, schools aim to reduce the mismatch between curriculum level and learner readiness that contributes to both boredom and frustration. This flexibility challenges the long-standing assumption that age-based year levels are a necessary organising structure for secondary schooling.

However, the schools that have gone furthest in removing age-based structures also report some of the most challenging wellbeing data. This does not invalidate the structural approach, but it does suggest that grouping reform on its own does not guarantee stronger belonging or a more positive student experience.

Importantly, the Victorian government schools in this report, Templestowe, Bundoora, Wodonga, The Pavilion, and Bayside, all operate within standard curriculum and funding frameworks. Their structural flexibility uses existing system autonomy rather than requiring exemptions. This is significant as the 2024 Parliamentary Inquiry confirmed that the Victorian Curriculum is structured by learning bands and levels rather than age cohorts (Parliament of Victoria, 2024). Yet few schools have used this flexibility in sustained ways. The evidence from these schools suggests that this flexibility is available to more schools than currently use it.

Residential and community-living models represent another form of structural redesign. Rather than reorganising students by readiness, pathway or subject choice, these models redesign the conditions under which schooling occurs. Marshmead and Clunes, for example, take students out of the daily routines of conventional school and place them in small communities where cooking, cleaning, shared decision-making, conflict resolution and responsibility for others become part of the curriculum. In this sense, the innovation is not simply the location, but the redistribution of responsibility. Students are positioned not only as recipients of teaching, but as contributors to the functioning of the learning community.

This reframes residential learning as more than a change of site. It becomes a structural redesign of the relationship between learning, responsibility and community life. In this sense, Marshmead reflected what Loader described as a curriculum arising through students' experience of living together, with "the focus … on the growth of persons and of community" (Loader, 2002, p.120).

Across the schools in this report, structural innovation does not produce a single pattern of outcomes. Instead, different models appear to prioritise different educational goals. Schools emphasising student agency and flexible pathways often demonstrate strong engagement and post-school destination outcomes, while also encountering tensions around attendance, retention or standardised academic indicators. Other models prioritise academic performance or experiential learning, community living or personal and social growth, each with their own strengths and trade-offs. These patterns suggest that structural redesign in the middle years redistributes educational outcomes rather than uniformly improving all system

indicators. Understanding the purpose and context of each reform model therefore becomes critical when interpreting its impact.

4.3 Relational continuity levers

Every school in this report has invested in structures designed to ensure that students are known well by adults. These structures take different forms. Templestowe College uses Connect Mentors. Bundoora Secondary College operates PAL mentoring. Wodonga Middle Years College assigns CARE teachers. Woodleigh organises students into Homesteads. The Pavilion School and Hester Hornbrook Academy use classroom triads. Carey Grammar runs cross-age Mentor Groups. Although the models differ, the underlying principle is consistent. Schools have deliberately designed relational structures to ensure that students maintain sustained contact with at least one adult who knows them well.

This approach contrasts with conventional secondary schooling, where students may interact with many teachers across a week but have limited ongoing connection with any single adult. The schools in this report have intentionally redesigned that pattern. Across the schools in this report, this relational continuity is frequently described as one of the most successful elements of the middle years approach, although it is also resource intensive.

This finding aligns with research that positions relationships as educationally constitutive rather than supplementary. Noddings (2012) argues that the caring relation between teacher and student is a foundational condition for learning. The middle years literature similarly emphasises sustained teacher–student relationships as a defining characteristic of effective middle schools (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Stevenson, 2002).

The re-engagement schools make this most visible. At Hester Hornbrook Academy and The Pavilion, rebuilding trust is treated as the first educational task. Both schools structure classrooms around a triad model involving a teacher, a youth worker and an education support worker. At The Pavilion, resourcing constraints mean that these roles are not always present in the classroom simultaneously. However, the support remains available and can be accessed when needed rather than embedded in every lesson.

This model highlights an issue with implications beyond re-engagement settings. Teaching curriculum, providing relational support and responding to crisis are distinct forms of work. Expecting a single teacher to manage all three simultaneously may represent a structural design problem rather than a manageable professional demand.

4.4 Agency, pathways and broader definitions of success

Across the schools in this report there is a consistent emphasis on student agency. Many of the schools provide students with meaningful opportunities to influence what and how they learn. This ranges from the large elective programs at Templestowe College and Carey, to co-constructed personalised learning plans at GVL and Bundoora Secondary College, to project-based exhibition work at Preshil and High Tech High. The extent of autonomy varies across contexts, but the underlying idea is consistent. When students perceive learning as relevant to

their interests and goals, they are more likely to invest effort and persistence (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Fredricks et al., 2004).

Berry (2023) describes a continuum of student engagement ranging from passive participation, where students comply with the teacher's plan, through active investment, where students find personal value in learning, to driving, where students set their own goals and regulate their own progress. Some schools in this report, particularly the re-engagement settings, described efforts to move students beyond compliance toward individual goal setting. The "Yes is the default" principle used at Templestowe College, Bundoora Secondary College and GVL similarly signals an intention to position students as decision-makers rather than passive recipients of schooling.

In other cases, it is less clear whether students are actively investing in their learning or driving it themselves, rather than participating within a more flexible structure designed by teachers. Berry (2023) notes that driving requires students to set goals, seek feedback, monitor their own progress and collaborate actively with others. Whether school structures that offer greater choice also support these forms of self-regulation remains unclear. It is possible for students to exercise choice without developing the habits that sustain deeper learning. Addressing this question would require classroom observation and student-level research that lies beyond the scope of the present report.

The evidence from these schools suggests that agency tends to be introduced progressively. Bundoora's scaffolded Entry Year before PACE21, Carey's staged expansion of elective choice beginning in Year 8, and Templestowe's requirement for literacy and numeracy benchmarks before full self-direction all reflect a similar design principle. In each case, autonomy is developed gradually rather than offered in full from the outset.

Most schools in this report position vocational and applied pathways as legitimate and valued success outcomes alongside academic pathways. These schools appear to adopt a broader conception of what successful schooling should achieve. In this respect, engagement is connected not only to how students learn, but also to what forms of success they can see as possible and legitimate. This shift is also reflected in emerging work on alternative measures of student achievement, such as the University of Melbourne's New Metrics for Success initiative, which seeks to recognise capabilities, dispositions and applied learning alongside traditional academic indicators (University of Melbourne, n.d.).

While these schools broaden the definition of success, they also raise an important question about pathway decisions. When multiple pathways are available, some students may choose vocational or applied options earlier than they might otherwise have done. Whether this represents a positive alignment between schooling and student interests, or whether it risks narrowing future options prematurely requires further research.

4.5 Pedagogy and assessment: the less visible levers

One finding from this report is that the innovations it documents are more visible structurally and relationally rather than pedagogical. Removing year levels, creating vertical classes,

building mentoring systems, redesigning entry processes, establishing multi-age hubs are important changes to how schools are organised and how relationships are sustained. The available evidence suggests that these changes can influence engagement. However, they are not the same as changing how learning and teaching operate inside classrooms.

Across the schools in this report, pedagogical change is usually described as "inquiry-based," "project-based", "student-directed" or "experiential". These descriptions explain what the school aspires to, but they do not show what classroom practice looks like in action, how teachers respond to student thinking in real time, what kinds of feedback students receive, or whether the intellectual demand differs from that found in well-taught conventional classrooms. A school may reorganise students structurally, but if teaching practices remain unchanged, the learning experience itself may remain similar. Pedagogy is also shaped by the quality of supportive interactions between teachers and students, which Longmuir (2025) identifies as an important influence on engagement.

Berry (2023) argues that classroom culture is characterised by three interacting elements - teaching practices, the interactions and relationships between people, and the organisation and management of the classroom. From this perspective, changing the organisation without changing teaching practice and relational interaction addresses only one of three elements that shape students' actual experience of learning. Ritchhart (2015, 2023) takes this further, arguing that a classroom's culture of thinking is shaped by the expectations, language, routines and interactions that make thinking visible and valued. A school may therefore change the conditions around learning without necessarily changing the quality of learning itself.

This points to a limitation of the present report rather than a criticism of the schools. Desktop research and school visits can document structures and programs, but evaluating pedagogy requires sustained classroom observation, analysis of student work, and engagement with teachers about their practice. Such work lies beyond the scope of this report but would be essential for any future evaluation of whether these models support deeper learning as well as stronger engagement.

It also suggests that professional learning is a crucial, though less visible, lever for reform. Ritchhart (2015, 2023) notes that teachers often need to unlearn inherited habits of traditional practice if they are to create new cultures of learning. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) argue that sustainable educational change depends on building professional capital, including the collective expertise, commitment and collaborative culture of the teaching workforce. A small number of schools in this report appear to have invested deliberately in this dimension. The Pavilion School has developed a documented five-phase teaching model supported by coaching and collaborative planning. High Tech High has embedded teacher learning within its Graduate School of Education, producing educators trained in project-based pedagogy. These examples represent attempts to align teaching practice with structural innovation.

More broadly, pedagogy is not the only less visible lever. Curriculum design, assessment practices, wellbeing supports, and family partnerships also shape whether students experience learning as meaningful, accessible, and worth persisting with. Yet these dimensions are less consistently documented across the schools in this report than structural

design or pathway organisation. Making progress visible to learners and supporting teachers to identify where students are in their learning and what they need next is critical (Saubern, 2025). Students are more likely to persist when challenge is pitched appropriately, progress is visible, and feedback supports the next step in learning.

Curriculum, in particular, receives limited attention in the available evidence. Most examples focus on how curriculum is organised and accessed rather than what is taught and whether the learning is intellectually demanding. A school may appear innovative because it offers elective choice or flexible pathways, but if the curriculum lacks depth or rigour, the learning outcomes may remain shallow. This raises a broader question about whether existing curriculum expectations are themselves too crowded to support the depth, flexibility, and responsiveness these models are attempting to create.

Family partnership also appears across several schools, for example through personalised learning plan meetings at GVL and the Family Involvement Program at Overnewton, but it is not explored systematically in this report. How schools position families, whether as active partners in learning design or more peripheral supporters, may influence engagement more than the current evidence is able to show.

Overall, the less visible levers, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, professional learning, wellbeing support, and family partnership, may be just as important as the other levers in shaping whether students experience learning as challenging, meaningful, and worth sustained effort.

4.6 Conditions for sustained innovation

The schools in this report suggest that innovation depends on a consistent set of enabling conditions, including sustained leadership commitment, community trust, adequate funding and staffing, deliberate use of existing policy flexibility, and investment in relational infrastructure. In most cases, reform was initiated by a specific leader, for example, Peter Hutton at Templestowe and GVL, the founding principal at The Pavilion, the leadership change at Bundoora in 2019. The question of whether innovation can survive leadership change is answered positively at Templestowe, which has institutionalised its model under subsequent leadership.

Wodonga represents a different model, where innovation was initiated through system-level restructure rather than an individual principal's vision. Three secondary schools were merged and reimagined as two specialist settings in 2006. This is the only school in this report where the decision to innovate was made above the individual school. Whether this approach produces more durable innovation than leader-dependent reform is worth further consideration.

One school in this report involves a school with nearly a century of progressive practice that is now navigating declining enrolments and financial restructuring. This suggests that even long-established educational philosophy requires ongoing alignment with community expectations, financial viability and pathway credibility. Innovation requires continuous

maintenance.

Funding and staffing are particularly important. Several of the models documented depend on staffing arrangements that require either additional investment or a different distribution of existing resources. HHA's multidisciplinary classroom teams, The Pavilion's triad model and GVL's personalised learning plan meetings all require workforce capacity beyond a conventional teacher-to-class allocation. Independent schools fund these through fees, government schools rely on targeted funding streams, creative use of the Student Resource Package, or both. Where resourcing is constrained, the capacity to sustain intensive supports is correspondingly limited. The evidence also suggests that replicating these models would require careful attention to leadership, resourcing and community context.

4.7 Measuring success and interpreting evidence

A recurring issue in this report is that the success of middle years innovation is difficult to capture through conventional school metrics alone. Attendance, retention, NAPLAN and VCE outcomes remain important, but each provides only a partial view. If engagement is understood as behavioural, emotional and cognitive, then evidence of success should reflect all three dimensions, encompassing attainment and participation, as well as belonging, aspiration, intellectual engagement, persistence, pathway formation and the quality of relationships that support learning. A student may attend school irregularly while still engaging meaningfully through flexible or hybrid arrangements; VCE results are not equally relevant for all schools, particularly where programs value vocational pathways, re-engagement or learner agency alongside academic attainment. In some settings, schools are working with students whose prior disengagement or complex needs make growth over time a more meaningful indicator than performance against age-based benchmarks. For these reasons, the evidence from these schools is interpreted with caution throughout this report.

The most consistent finding across the schools in this report is how difficult it is to demonstrate impact with the evidence currently available. Enrolment growth at schools such as Templestowe (fewer than 300 to 1,250) and HHA (170 to 701) suggests community confidence and need. In a small number of cases, post-school destination data also points to positive outcomes for many students. However, these indicators capture only part of what these schools claim to be achieving.

Several schools report wellbeing survey results below state averages, and attendance remains an ongoing challenge in some high-autonomy models. Independent schools generally do not publish comparable engagement data. For schools such as GVL, Bayside, Carey and Overnewton, the relationship between innovation and outcomes is often asserted but not yet demonstrated clearly through public evidence. This reflects a broader limitation in existing accountability frameworks. Current measures were largely designed around conventional school structures and tend to emphasise academic performance at specific points in time. They are less effective at capturing outcomes such as engagement, agency, belonging and capability development. Emerging initiatives such as Bedales' BAC framework and the New Metrics partnerships involving Bayside, Carey and Woodleigh represent early attempts to

broaden how student learning is recognised, although these approaches are not yet widely established and may be costly or resource-intensive to implement.

Senior secondary outcomes can be considered as one downstream indicator, but they should not be treated as the primary test of middle years success. This is especially important where schools are intentionally broadening pathways and definitions of achievement. Median VCE scores across the schools in this report do not suggest a clear relationship between structural innovation in the middle years and improved senior academic performance. Schools serving communities with higher socio-educational advantage tend to report higher median VCE scores regardless of whether their middle years structures are conventional or innovative. Among government schools that have undertaken substantial structural redesign, median VCE scores remain modest, although some schools, such as Bundoora SC, show improvement over time. These patterns should be interpreted cautiously, as cohort size, student intake, pathway mix and the proportion of students undertaking non-ATAR pathways all shape school-level outcomes.

For schools that explicitly value vocational, applied or broader capability-based outcomes, lower median VCE scores may partly reflect a deliberate widening of pathways rather than a decline in academic quality. In this sense, senior secondary results are best understood as one limited indicator among several, rather than as a definitive measure of whether middle years reform has succeeded. The more important question is whether these models support stronger engagement, meaningful growth and credible futures for the students they serve.

Several strategies could strengthen the evidence base for future research. Longitudinal cohort tracking would allow schools to demonstrate growth over time rather than relying on point-in-time indicators (Gonski et al., 2018). Student perception data collected at classroom level, rather than only through whole-school surveys, could help distinguish between compliance and genuine investment in learning (Berry, 2023). Finally, for schools that define success more broadly than academic achievement, credible frameworks for assessing capabilities such as collaboration, persistence and self-regulation would help make these outcomes more visible (Fredricks et al., 2004). Surveys of belonging and agency, student voice data, work samples, pathway data, mentoring records, exhibitions of learning, and qualitative accounts of student experience may all contribute to a fuller picture of how middle years models are functioning.

5 Broader Issues

5.1 Equity

Equity emerges as one of the most significant questions raised by this report. A consistent difference across the schools in this report concerns both what independent and government schools are able to do and what can be verified publicly about their impact. Independent schools operate with greater flexibility in governance, curriculum design and staffing,

supported by fee income and freedom from Department of Education policy requirements. Government schools work within standardised funding, curriculum and accountability frameworks but publish substantially more evidence about their outcomes through Annual Reports, Annual Implementation Plans and Attitudes to School Survey data. Their results are therefore more transparent and their challenges more visible. Several independent schools in this report, including Woodleigh, Carey and Overnewton, describe innovative structures but do not publicly demonstrate their impact on engagement, while government schools such as Templestowe College and Bundoora Secondary College present both strengths and challenges in their published data. The absence of reported tensions in independent schools may therefore reflect reporting gaps rather than the absence of tensions.

Many of the most structurally innovative schools in this report are independent, and their capacity to innovate is closely linked to fee income, governance flexibility and self-selecting communities. Woodleigh (ICSEA 1116), Carey (ICSEA 1177) and Bedales (£55,071 per year) operate under conditions of substantial advantage. The rural immersion models considered in this study are almost entirely confined to high-fee independent schools. If immersive, residential and challenge-based experiences are developmentally powerful for adolescents, then restricting access to families who can afford such programs raises questions about equity of provision.

Self-selection further complicates interpretation of outcomes. Independent schools enrol families who actively choose their educational model, meaning that positive engagement outcomes may reflect values alignment and family motivation as much as the school's structural design. Some schools acknowledge this dynamic directly in their documentation.

The government schools in this report, Bundoora Secondary College, Wodonga Middle Years College and The Pavilion School, demonstrate that innovation is possible within public provision. However, they also illustrate the constraints under which such innovation operates. Wodonga's outcomes remain difficult to shift despite a coherent structural design. Bundoora continues to face persistent attendance challenges. The Pavilion School has maintained a waiting list since 2007, reflecting demand that exceeds available places.

Finally, the relationship between ICSEA and VCE outcomes reflects broader socio-educational patterns rather than school design alone. While schools can influence engagement, pedagogy and pathways, academic outcomes remain strongly shaped by the educational resources, expectations and prior learning experiences that students bring with them.

5.2 Innovation and the policy environment

Most of the Victorian schools in this report have reorganised how students access the existing curriculum rather than rethinking what the curriculum is or how learning is assessed. This may represent the most feasible pathway within current government settings, but it also raises a broader policy question - whether further gains in student engagement depend not only on structural redesign, but also on greater flexibility in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. This question becomes more pressing in the context of GenAI, which intensifies debates about

what is now most worth learning, how knowledge should be used, and which forms of thinking schools should continue to prioritise.

The international schools push change further. Bedales has spent two decades developing an alternative assessment framework through its Bedales Assessed Courses. High Tech High has moved away from standardised testing and built its curriculum almost entirely around interdisciplinary project-based learning. These examples represent deeper challenges to conventional schooling than anything documented in the Victorian schools in this report. Whether such approaches are desirable or achievable within the Victorian context is a separate question, but the contrast is worth noting.

The policy environment may partly explain why Victorian innovation has remained primarily structural rather than curricular or assessment-based. The 2024 Parliamentary Inquiry confirmed that school autonomy is an explicit feature of the Victorian system (Parliament of Victoria, 2024). However, accountability frameworks operate in the opposite direction. Schools are evaluated through NAPLAN proficiency against year-level benchmarks, Attitudes to School Survey data, retention rates and VCE completion rates, all measures designed around conventional age-graded schooling. When schools group students by readiness rather than age, their performance can appear weaker against benchmarks designed for age-based systems, even when students are making substantial learning progress.

Recent policy directions have also emphasised explicit instruction, structured literacy and increasingly standardised approaches to teaching (Victorian Department of Education, 2024b; Parliament of Victoria, 2024). These approaches are not inherently incompatible with the innovations described in this report, but they signal a system moving toward greater prescription. Schools that have developed models centred on student agency and self-directed learning may therefore find it more difficult to align their practices with system-level expectations.

The schools in this report appear to have innovated largely through determined leadership, community trust and creative use of the flexibility available within existing policy settings. Whether such innovation can be sustained or expanded across the system depends partly on whether policy settings create conditions that support responsible experimentation.

Questions raised in this report about how success in schooling should be defined also align with emerging research on alternative approaches to assessment. The University of Melbourne's New Metrics initiative, for example, seeks to develop ways of recognising complex competencies such as collaboration, ethical understanding and problem solving that are not easily captured through traditional academic indicators (University of Melbourne, n.d.). Schools emphasising student agency, personalised pathways and applied learning may therefore be pursuing forms of learning that remain only partially visible through conventional measures such as attendance, NAPLAN or retention.

5.3 Technology and the future of middle years schooling

Technology is not a central feature of most of the Victorian schools in this report, but its

relative absence is itself notable given the growing influence of digital tools, adaptive platforms and generative AI on students' learning lives. Alpha School raises the question most directly, but among the Victorian schools technology is largely treated as a tool within existing practices rather than as a driver of structural or pedagogical change.

This absence is notable given the scale of digital distraction reported by students. Around 27% of Year 8 and Year 9 students in the PISA 2022 survey reported being distracted by digital devices in most or every lesson (van der Kleij et al., 2025). Current policy responses have focused primarily on restricting device use rather than exploring how technology may reshape what schools need to do. At the same time, generative AI tools are already altering how students access information, complete written work and approach problem solving.

If adaptive technologies can deliver personalised content learning effectively, schools will increasingly need to consider how technology-enabled instruction and human-centred approaches interact. Traditional assessment methods that rely heavily on submitted written work may become less reliable as AI tools improve. Schools that have already moved toward demonstration-based assessment, such as Bedales and High Tech High, or competency-based profiling, such as the New Metrics partnerships involving Bayside, Carey and Woodleigh, may therefore be better positioned for these changes.

The evidence base for AI-enabled learning at scale is still developing. However, the schools described in this report may already be strengthening the foundations that will remain essential regardless of technological change - strong relationships between students and adults, meaningful student agency, and learning experiences that require thinking, collaboration and application.

6 Implications for policy and practice

The schools in this report do not point to a single model of effective middle years reform. They offer insights into what schools are doing differently and the conditions that appear to support sustained change. Collectively, they do suggest several implications for broader discussion among school and system leaders.

First, the evidence indicates that middle years reform is most effective when it does not rely on a single intervention. The strongest examples combine structural flexibility, sustained adult-student relationships, meaningful student agency, and broader definitions of success. This suggests that middle years reform is most likely to be effective when organisation, pedagogy, relationships and pathways are considered together rather than in isolation.

Second, structural change appears to be one of the more visible and actionable levers available to schools. Changes to grouping, pathways, timetabling and mentoring can often be implemented more readily than deep pedagogical change, and they may create more favourable conditions for engagement. At the same time, structural redesign alone is unlikely

to be sufficient. Where schools reorganise students without corresponding attention to teaching practice, belonging and learner support, the impact on engagement may be limited.

The residential and community-living models considered in this report raise a system-level implication. If immersive experiences that build responsibility, confidence, belonging and community contribution are developmentally significant rather than optional enrichment, system leaders should consider how comparable experiences might be made available beyond high-fee independent settings. The central issue is whether the personal and social growth enabled by these programs should be treated as core educational work.

Third, student engagement should remain the central evaluative question. This means evaluating not only attendance or compliance, but also belonging, relevance, intellectual challenge, persistence and the extent to which students can see credible futures for themselves in schooling. This places the quality of students' experience at the centre of future review and advocacy work.

Fourth, the evidence indicates that existing Victorian policy settings allow more flexibility than is often assumed. However, the schools profiled here have generally relied on strong local leadership, community trust and creative use of available autonomy. This suggests that wider uptake of innovative middle years models may depend not only on formal flexibility, but also on clearer guidance, stronger system support, and accountability settings that can accommodate more diverse school designs.

Fifth, the report highlights the need for stronger evidence. Publicly available data can describe structures, pathways and some outcomes, but it provides only limited insight into classroom pedagogy or the quality of students' engagement in practice. This points to the value of future work that combines school-level documentation with classroom observation, student voice, and closer exploration of how pedagogy, structure and relationships interact.

Finally, a recurring implication of this report is the need for a more adequate engagement metric for schools. Attendance, retention, NAPLAN and senior secondary outcomes remain important, but they do not capture whether students feel known, capable, purposeful, connected, trusted, challenged or able to contribute. If schools are to be encouraged to support personal and social growth alongside academic learning, system evaluation must include indicators of belonging, agency, confidence, responsibility, relational trust, contribution and intellectual engagement.

The University of Melbourne's New Metrics for Success initiative provides one important example of work already underway to recognise broader capabilities beyond conventional academic indicators. However, such approaches can be resource-intensive, requiring significant professional learning, assessment design and partnership infrastructure. The challenge for the system is to develop engagement measures that are credible and nuanced, while also being practical, affordable and usable across diverse school contexts.

7 Conclusion

This report has shown that middle years innovation in Victoria is not defined by a single model, but by a shared attempt to rethink how schooling is organised, experienced and valued during a period when many young people become disengaged. The schools in this report are using different combinations of structural redesign, relational continuity, student agency, pathway diversification and broader conceptions of success to respond to this challenge.

Collectively, the evidence suggests that meaningful innovation is possible within existing Victorian policy settings, but that it is uneven, difficult to sustain, and not always well recognised by current accountability frameworks. The strongest examples in this report do not simply rearrange timetables or pathways; they seek to create learning environments in which young people are known, challenged, supported and able to see value in continuing to learn.

The broader implication is that middle years reform should not be judged only by whether it raises conventional academic indicators. If the aim is to strengthen belonging, persistence, agency and credible futures for diverse learners, then systems will also need broader ways of recognising success. Programs such as Marshmead, which in 1991 deliberately set aside the academic curriculum to focus on community living, personal growth and shared responsibility, offer an early and relevant example of what it means to treat social and personal development as core educational work rather than as an addition to it. In that sense, the schools described in this report are, above all, an invitation to reconsider what middle years schooling is for, and how it might be designed more responsively for the full range of learners it serves.

7.1 Questions for Discussion

The following questions are drawn from the patterns identified across the schools in this report. They are offered as prompts for school leaders, system leaders, policymakers and researchers.

Structure and organisation

1. The Victorian Curriculum allows progression by learning level rather than age. Why are so few schools grouping students by readiness in Years 7 to 9? What would need to change at school and system levels for more schools to experiment with this approach?
2. What would it take for a government secondary school to introduce a highly personalised program with extensive elective choice and individual learning plans? What would this require in staffing, timetabling, resources and policy settings?
3. Several schools in this report have removed year levels while also reporting mixed wellbeing data. What relationship might exist between structural flexibility, student autonomy and student belonging?
4. Residential and community-living programs currently sit outside the reach of most government school students. If they are genuinely valuable, what would a system-level

response look like? And what aspects of conventional schooling might need to be reconsidered to make room for them?

Evidence and measurement

5. If schools aim to meet students where they are in their learning, how should success be measured? What might accountability frameworks look like if they focused on growth and progress rather than performance against age-based expectations?
6. The innovations documented in this report are largely structural and relational. What kinds of research would be needed to understand whether teaching and learning practices within these schools are substantively different from those in more conventional settings?

Policy and system conditions

7. The 2024 Parliamentary Inquiry confirmed that Victorian schools have considerable flexibility in curriculum implementation and pedagogy. At the same time, recent policy directions emphasise structured literacy, explicit instruction and greater consistency in teaching practice. How compatible are these directions with the innovations described in this report?
8. Many of the schools in this report share a common feature: a principal or founding leader who made a sustained commitment to structural change. Is strong individual leadership a necessary condition for innovation, or could system-level supports make innovation less dependent on particular individuals?
9. Most of the innovations documented here reorganise how students access the existing curriculum rather than rethinking what is taught or how learning is assessed. Is this sufficient to address middle years disengagement, or does it leave deeper structural questions unresolved?

Pathways and definitions of success

10. Many schools in this report position vocational and applied pathways as valued outcomes alongside academic pathways. How might middle years schooling help students see credible futures across a range of post-school destinations, and what implications does this have for how schools define and report success?
11. Hester Hornbrook Academy and The Pavilion staff classrooms with multidisciplinary teams that may include teachers, youth workers and other specialists. Both schools have persistent waitlists. What might this suggest about unmet student support needs and about the capacity of mainstream staffing models to address them?
12. To what extent do these school models help students experience learning as meaningful, relevant and connected to a future they can imagine for themselves?

Technology and the future

13. If adaptive technologies become capable of supporting personalised mastery of academic content, what educational purposes remain uniquely human and central to schooling?
14. Generative AI is already changing how students access information and produce work. How might middle years schooling adapt in curriculum design, assessment practices and the role of the teacher as these technologies become more capable?

The big question

15. If a Years 7 to 9 program were designed today from first principles for the full range of Victorian learners, including those several years ahead or behind expected levels, what might it look like? What aspects of current schooling would be retained, and what might be redesigned?

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