Keeping Kids Connected to Learning and Schooling Summit #2

2022 Summary Report: Reimagining schooling for disengaged and detached young people

Commissioner for Children & Young People

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Commissioner's Message

Despite COVID-19 restrictions having been all but eliminated from day to day living there is still the knock-on effect of its impact which is like to place educators, teachers, families, children and school communities under significant and ongoing pressure for the foreseeable future. Managing ongoing teacher shortages due to new waves of active COVID cases coupled with pressures on families as a result of significant increases in cost of living, housing stress and rolling isolation for children affected by regular illnesses and new waves of COVID cases is still a concern.

In recognition of the positive impact school has on mental health and safety, a key feature of South Australia's COVID response has been to keep children in school wherever possible, and to always have a place-based option available for vulnerable children. Whilst children and young people in South Australia were generally able to attend school over the past few years, COVID has had an enormous impact on their school experience.

From what children and young people tell me, everything has been impacted. Young children report frequently having teachers who don't know their name, interests, and challenges. High school students have told me absences due to lock down, illness and close contact isolation meant they felt overwhelmed, were worried about falling behind in every subject, and could not see how they might catch up, this in turn having an impact on their mental health. I am also hearing about children who haven't been to school for months and are completely disengaged, with no clear pathway to keeping these students connected to their learning.

Likewise, many parents lament a loss of connection and relationship to schools due to not being allowed to be on campus with the loss of social school functions and events that build connections also a contributing factor to this feeling of alienation from their child's or children's school.

Service providers and specialist programs have also been impacted by health orders that prevented third parties from being in schools. This meant leadership, sports and resilience programs were also missing for extended periods. Often these programs are the things that have positive impact on students' sense of belonging, engagement, and wellbeing.

It should therefore come as no surprise to any of us that some children and young people have fallen through the school safety net, and other children and young people are feeling like school is not meeting their needs and is falling short.

The goal of education is to support every student to be the best they can be no matter where they live or what challenges they face. Education data over decades has shown us that not every child enjoys equal benefits from schooling, and that an education gap can have lifelong consequences.

We know that what happens at school and how students are supported to keep connected to their learning and their school community matters. No child should be denied the benefits of school and learning, and we must deliver an education system that believes every single child matters and is able to access the benefits of education with ease.

This means more schools being supported and rewarded to take an active role in addressing familial, social, and economic disadvantage. It also means paying active attention to those children who face discrimination and barriers to their right to an education, including children with chronic illness and disability, children who are constantly bullied and harassed, children in out of home care, children who are carers, children who are chronic non-attenders, children who are in contact with the child justice system, and children who are homeless.

This call for more support is coming at a time when the system is already under stress. Like people, systems are less tolerant, open minded, or accommodating in these situations. They are less likely to respond in kind or inclusive ways or display respectful and validating experiences. Humans are required to deliver on these attributes which is why the system must be established with these key human touchpoints in place. We can also expect that stresses on families, children, teachers, and leaders will present as behaviour challenges and relationship difficulties in those children and young people who have been or are most affected by the barriers that exist.

We must ensure that the increased pressure at the system, school, teacher, family, and child levels, are therefore not met with increased take homes, go homes, suspensions, exclusions or worse 'expulsions', that result in disconnection from learning and school.

I urge all stakeholders with an interest in changing the education gap in South Australia, to work collaboratively and to do all that they can to look at what pressure valves we can release to ensure children don't bear the brunt of a system that is under stress.

Helen Connolly
Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia

Introduction

The second Keeping Kids Connected to Learning and Schooling Summit took place on 6th May 2022, more than a year after the inaugural summit of the same name held in March 2021. Both events were co-hosted by South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, the Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion (University of South Australia), the South Australian Primary Principals Association (SAPPA), the South Australian Secondary Principals Association (SASPA) and Flinders University.

The 2021 Summit brought stakeholders together to discuss the key challenges and opportunities to successful inclusion of all students following the release of two reports and their recommendations about exclusionary practices in South Australian schools:

- *The Final Report of the Inquiry into Suspension, Exclusion and Expulsion Processes in South Australian Government Schools* (the Graham Inquiry) by Professor Linda J. Graham and the Centre for Inclusive Education.[i]
- *The Blame Game: The perspectives of South Australian children and young people on the causes and impacts of school exclusions* by Helen Connolly, South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People.[ii]

The 2022 Summit changed focus, looking at disengagement and detachment from school and working towards cross-sectoral responses to support children and young people who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging from schooling.

The 2022 event attracted approximately 95 participants, including educators, principals, support workers, academics, researchers and policymakers from the Department for Education and Department for Child Protection.

The aim of this second report is to document the voices of key stakeholders and to inform the Department for Education's ('the Department') behaviour and engagement reform in a way that will ensure it is both useful for educators and practitioners and meets the needs of all children and young people.

This office would also like to thank Dr Andrew Bills, Angela Falkenberg, Prof Anna Sullivan, Jayne Heath and Nigel Howard for their ongoing engagement in educational inclusion.

Background

A summary of feedback from participants in the March 2021 Summit was presented in a report to the Department for Education in June 2021.[iii] One of the key messages that emerged from the 2021 Summit was that stakeholders want to be involved in the Department's response to the recommendations made in the abovementioned reports and the actions that they will take to improve outcomes for children and young people, as well as improving school culture.

It is understood that this program of work is planned to continue under the current state government, with the $15 million allocation now extended for two further years. The current government has also made further commitments related to student wellbeing, inclusion and early intervention, including:

- An extra $50 million over four years for 100 new 'mental health and learning support specialists to provide support and guidance for government primary and secondary school students and staff'.
- An investment of $28.8 million over 4 years to appoint an autism lead teacher in every government primary school.
- A Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care, which will examine how universal quality preschool for three- and four-year-olds can be delivered in South Australia.
- Establishing five new technical colleges across regional and metropolitan South Australia for students in years 10 to 12 to complete their SACE and transition to further training, education and employment.

One of the recommendations made in the Graham Inquiry was the decommissioning of Flexible Learning Options (FLO). The former state government committed $15 million over four years to a program of work that seeks to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline, including changes to policy, data collection and the provision of services and support for students, teachers and leaders.

Although the Department has said it expects to wind down FLO enrolments from 2023, the 'timeline to fully decommission FLO will depend on new service offerings in place' and the Department has committed to engage with a range of stakeholders as it considers different approaches, supports and interventions 'to best meet the varying needs and circumstances of students who are currently enrolled through FLO'.[iv]

The Department's commitment to engage with stakeholders and ensure appropriate service offerings are put in place is welcome. There was a real sense among participants at the 2021 Summit that 'mainstream' schools are not consistently catering for all students, and that there needs to be an alternative, or fundamental improvements made to the support currently being provided to all students, teachers and school leaders.

This report summarises what key stakeholders at the 2022 Keeping Kids Connected Summit thought were the key issues, challenges and solutions for the Department to consider during this process. This includes their vision for schools that are responsive to all young people, but particularly to those who they know are doing it tough, integrating both wellbeing and learning, and supporting young people's confidence and hope for the future.

In the year since the 2021 summit:

- FLO students account for 3.5% of South Australia's secondary student population. In some schools, this figure is more than 12%. In some schools, upwards of 25% of senior school student are enrolled in FLO.

- Indigenous students, students with disability and young people in care are overrepresented in FLO programs.

- Three quarters of FLO students have attendance as their presenting issue.

- A decrease in FLO enrolments has coincided with a decline in retention rates to year 12.

- Boys continue to be overrepresented in school suspension and exclusions, which can often exacerbate school disengagement.

- The number of specialised assistance schools has increased, along with enrolments at these schools.

Summit Overview

The day was divided into four sessions, which covered different stages of the schooling system: entering, engagement, education and exiting. Each session began with a provocation from a speaker that led into small-group discussions about the key issues and potential solutions.

To open the event, Commissioner for Children and Young People Helen Connolly, shared insights from children and young people about their perceptions and experiences of school and the education system. Professor Anna Sullivan from the University of South Australia summarised what we know about disengagement.

Nigel Howard from Flinders University and University of South Australia provided an overview of the educational eco-system for disengaging and detached young people, and the range of factors that can lead to disengagement from school. Participants were asked to consider how we can ensure that even the most 'larrikin of learners' is entering and accessing an education that allows them to exercise genuine options in their adult lives, including what mainstream schools could learn from FLO and alternative schools.

Dale Murray (Director Education, Life Without Barriers) led the first provocation relating to 'entering the system' and how to design and deliver an education system that supports and meets the educational needs of all young people, particularly the most vulnerable. Highlighting connectedness to school as the most important protective factor for children and young people, Dale invited participants to consider which groups of young people are, or are not represented in their programs; how we relate to students and understand their behaviour to ensure we have the 'right fit' for the right person'.

The second session focused on engagement and asked participants to share insights about what 'attendance' or 'engagement' looks like at their site, and how we might understand or do things differently to keep young people engaged in education and learning at a school, community and systems level.

The Head of Campus at FAME Flexible Learning Centre, Yvonne Schultz, shared experiences of keeping students engaged through FAME's drop-in centre, engagement with community services, and team teaching and youth worker staffing model, which is flexible, treats young people as individuals, and provides a consistent and safe environment for them to come to.

The third session focused on how to ensure alternative education integrates curriculum and is an integral part of the education system. Dr Sarah Hattam, Senior Lecturer at UniSA Education Futures, shared insights about enabling pedagogies at UniSA College, which operates in 'the middle space between high school and university' and offers programs that aim to disrupt educational disadvantage and prepare students for higher education. Participants were asked to reflect on the knowledge and skills students leave their site with, and how this is communicated to others.

Fred Heidt, the Executive Director of Youth Inc. introduced the fourth and final provocation session, which was focused on 'exiting' and how we support young people to successfully negotiate the next transition. Youth Inc. is an alternative education provider that supports young people aged 17 to 24 years who are not fully engaging in mainstream education, doing this by focusing on practical, action learning in the real world, rather than teaching in conventional classrooms and subjects.

Key Messages

Although the sessions addressed different issues, there were some consistent themes discussed throughout the day. Participants identified several opportunities for changes that could be made at the site level, local community level, and systemic and structural levels, that they believe would make a positive difference to keeping all kids connected to learning and schooling.

To move towards a more inclusive and engaging system we need:

An educational system that keeps all young people engaged in education and:

- o Promotes restorative, trauma-informed understandings of and responses to behaviour.
- o Supports student voice, choice and agency.
- o Fosters community connections, including those made with community services, local councils, higher education and local businesses.
- o Engages with families.
- o Provides welcoming, safe and predictable physical environments and infrastructure that promote play, physical activity and relaxation, as well as active learning.
- o Offers a relevant and engaging curriculum and methods of teaching.
- o Defines and measures engagement in a way that values student wellbeing and voice, and which addresses the complex factors that can influence school attendance.

Educators and school leaders who are:
- o Supported to access professional learning.
- o Resourced to build connections with students, families and community.
- o Provided with opportunities to engage directly with other educators and schools as well as the Department.
- o Trusted to do what is best for their school community.

Schools that are child focused and provide:
- o Individualised case management models which value lived experience and wellbeing.
- o Flexible curriculum delivery that offers opportunities for project-based and student-driven learning.
- o Higher staff to student ratios and diverse staff beyond teachers, including support from social workers and youth workers.

Alternative education is considered an integral part of the school community and provide:
- o Information about the range of pathways and options available to students, and where they can go for more information and support.
- o 'Life skills' lessons that develop young people's financial literacy, interpersonal skills, and ability to navigate services, apply for jobs, and live independently.

How do we keep young people engaged and connected to school and learning?

Participants considered connectedness to school as one of the most important protective factors for children and young people. Designing and delivering an education system that meets the educational needs of all young people requires a broader definition of engagement and a clearer understanding of how engagement can be measured.

Core to the response was the importance of valuing, embedding and incentivising engagement practices at an early stage, rather than delaying responses until after students have disengaged.

Participants shared understandings of what engagement looks like and the positive practices they use to increase engagement, as well as the support they need at a school and system level to keep all children and young people engaged.

Children and young people's voice and agency

Stakeholders talked about children being at the 'centre' of the education system. There was a real sense that children and young people are more likely to be engaged in their education when they have opportunities to have a say in relation to different aspects of their learning and their school's environment, its policies, and its processes and practices.

Participants highlighted the importance of children and young people having more voice, choice and agency regarding how they learn, what they learn, the school environment and the kind of support being made available to them.

Feeling heard, represented and valued are key to student wellbeing and to a sense of belonging, which research shows is closely linked to positive student engagement and outcomes. Increasing the opportunities to have voice, choice and agency is a key part of building positive relationships between students and teachers, and to ensuring schools meet the diverse needs, interests and aspirations of all students to ultimately prevent children feeling disenfranchised and ultimately lead to their complete disengagement.

Engaging with families and the broader community

Families and carers play a key role in children and young people's engagement with schooling and learning, yet their capacity to do so can vary depending on the resources and support made available to them. Participants made several suggestions as to how schools can strengthen connections with families and the broader community in ways that will positively influence children and young people's engagement as soon as they enter the education system.

A number of participants highlighted the importance of schools in actively promoting cultural diversity, cultural understanding, and learning from different cultures, as central to a truly inclusive

school culture. They would like to see the Department for Education provide greater support for schools to raise cultural awareness, be respectful of cultural diversity, and bridge language barriers and gaps to thereby provide cultural safety.

They considered it important for schools to engage directly with families, both to understand their needs and expectations and to build a shared understanding of the power of education.

Connections and partnerships with the wider community were also considered essential. Many participants shared success stories of schools 'opening up' to a range of community services and partners across local councils, health, higher education and business. They were calling for greater support from the Department and government for community programs and work experience programs that build 'social capital' and keep children and young people connected and engaged to their local community.

Physical environments and school infrastructure

Participants described the importance of physical environments and infrastructure and how this is linked to feelings of connectedness, fun and belonging, but also to learning outcomes. They agreed that schools should be welcoming places where students feel comfortable and confident, and have opportunities to learn, play and relax.

Participants expressed concern about a lack of adequate play spaces, particularly in the context of the transition of Year 7 students into secondary schools, where the construction of new classrooms has been at the expense of play spaces. There were also concerns about the growing number of "super schools" and the challenges for these schools to create and maintain a sense of community and mitigate the risk that children will 'get lost in sheer numbers'.

Some tables discussed how super-schools could become more community orientated and segmented into smaller school environments, with separate teaching and play areas. Separate leadership and staffing for junior and senior schools, or even junior, middle and senior schools would also help foster a sense of community amongst students.

There was strong support for smaller class sizes insofar as they allow educators to really get to know students as individuals and understand their needs. Some participants emphasised the need for more support in classrooms, particularly Student Support Officers (SSOs), so that each child gets the support they need without teachers being 'overstretched'.

Some stakeholders discussed what could make schools more community orientated and welcoming. They noted that access to certain facilities, equipment, or areas of school grounds can often be restricted or 'out of bounds' during certain school hours, and closed completely outside of school hours. It was suggested that schools become more 'open' outside of school hours.

This is consistent with what children and young people have said about the importance of play and barriers to physical activity.[v] They have called for spaces where they can be active or hang out without feeling 'watched' or judged by older students; spaces that are more relaxed and where children can go to take a break or hang out, as well as more stimulating and interactive spaces that encourage experiential learning. They have also highlighted the importance of creating a uniform policy that supports physical activity, alongside provision of equipment, infrastructure and reliable transport.

Participants at the Summit highlighted positive examples of schools attached to TAFEs and other facilities that connect students with practical training or artistic activities. Flexibility and consistency were also emphasised, with participants suggesting that all students have the same homegroup throughout their entire schooling, and a buddy system that works across all year levels.

There were also discussions regarding when, where and how learning occurs, with some stakeholders raising questions about the structure of the school day. Although the current structure of the school day is generally accepted as 'normal', it is also well-known that teenagers sleep in, and tend to be more productive later in the day. As such, it might be worth exploring opportunities for school hours to be more flexible for older students.

Understanding behaviour and non-exclusionary responses

Educators and school leaders wanted every school to be resourced and skilled in positive, trauma-informed, relationship building and non-exclusionary 'behaviour management' approaches, that focused on strengths rather than deficits. They wanted support for educators to be able to 'look beyond behaviour to the cause' and respond appropriately.

Some stakeholders reported that a lot can be learnt from neurodiverse students and autism-friendly practice and environments about what engaging and inclusive environments and programs look like in practice. They highlighted the importance of educators providing clear explanations and positive expectations, and of educators and school leaders affording everyone a voice and fair process.

There was also some discussion about whether and how data could be collected in line with the contextual and child-centred understanding of engagement. It was generally considered useful in informing appropriate and effective policy and practices. In particular, stakeholders discussed the potential for KPIs to incentivise inclusive responses to behaviour and support educators to keep children engaged, particularly those with complex backgrounds or social, emotional, or learning needs.

Defining and measuring engagement

The indicators that are currently being used to measure educational engagement focus primarily on attendance and retention. The use of 'averages for attendance' hides the number of students who

are habitual 'non-attenders'. Likewise, by omitting year 12 students who 'drop out' during the year, the percentage of student retention is inflated.

As such, these indicators do not provide a complete picture of school disengagement.

NAPLAN results and SACE completion rates become important measures mainly because the use of proxy meanings of educational engagement and 'success' at a school are limited. Stakeholders would like to see additional engagement measures related to student voice and wellbeing introduced to complement existing measures. Such measures would not only better reflect the reality of children and young people's experiences, but also assist leaders and decisionmakers in schools and the Department to better understand and address the complex barriers to school attendance and engagement.

The importance of providing opportunities for students to provide feedback and to 'tell us if they are engaged or not', rather than adults or educators 'narrating over their experience' shouldn't be underestimated. Many stakeholders suggested inviting students to report on their relationships, behaviour, wellbeing and belonging, attendance, student voice, agency, participation and work completion and coupled with regular wellbeing check-ins with students done in the same way there is regular assessment of their academic engagement.

Participants identified a range of indicators that could be used to measure student engagement, including the extent to which children and young people:

- have someone who listens to them and in who they can trust
- have a voice and choices, feeling confident to ask questions and contribute
- would recommend their school or educational program to others
- regularly attend
- connect with peers and encourage their peers to join in
- connect with educators and other staff; and
- feel safe, cared about and can say 'I belong here'.

While negative or 'unproductive' student behaviour is already documented, there are less tools or frameworks available to measure positive behaviour, or positive changes in behaviour, attitudes and relationships.

Other suggestions for gathering a more complete measure of attendance and engagement included tracking student and carer complaints and feedback, and tracking attendance and engagement over time. Particularly throughout key milestones and transitions into and out of schools, school sectors, programs and services. This included gathering more information during the transition away from education into work, further education and training, employment or unemployment. The value of a database to determine where there are job opportunities and skill gaps that young people can

directly access, could help with matching student interests and aspirations with jobs and future educational pathways.

Opportunities for carers, other family members, and educators and/or support workers to provide feedback about student engagement and enrolment, as well as staff retention and wellbeing, were also considered important.

Curriculum and teaching

Participants also discussed a range of fun and engaging approaches to teaching, learning and curriculum delivery that keep children connected to learning and go beyond children sitting in classrooms and being 'talked at'. They wanted support for all educators to strike a balance between pushing young people to improve, and avoiding 'the tyranny of low expectations', whilst not being too challenging. They also wanted the Department to trust leadership and educators to teach children in the way they learn best.

Flexibility was considered a key part of engaging teaching and learning. Participants emphasised that flexibility does not mean that students 'can do whatever they want', but rather that students have choice and agency, and are supported and guided to explore diverse interests. This recognises that children and young people are more likely to be engaged when they have a say about what and how they learn. This also ensures that students can see the relevance and purpose of what they are learning and feel seen and valued in classroom environments.

Taking a 'relational approach' like those described above requires additional tools for educators wishing to take a restorative practices approach. Some talked about having animals at schools, including therapy dogs, and of having more team teaching in primary schools. It was also suggested that as part of creating a rich co-curricular program, more resources and knowledge could be put into provision of online and offline, hands-on, practical, and play-based learning opportunities and experiences, alongside the 'traditional' subjects.

Individualised learning plans

Some stakeholders were of the view that every child should be provided with an individualised learning plan when entering education. Children and young people, as well as their parents or guardians, should have input into this 'live' document, which should be updated to reflect a child's changing needs at different stages of the system until they transition out of school. These plans can also be used to transition into other schools, and between school sectors, from preschool to junior primary, and from primary through to middle and secondary school years.

The personalised case management model was also mentioned as a model that mainstream schools could adopt from FLO (see 'What can mainstream schools learn from FLO and other alternative models?'). Smaller class sizes and additional support staff were considered to be important structural changes that if made would facilitate 'meeting children where they're at' and enable teachers to better consider their learning needs based on 'their pace and their needs'.

In terms of other support that was considered necessary during key transitions, stakeholders wanted opportunities for children and young people to meet staff and students at their new school prior to making the transition.

While some highlighted the need for more information-sharing to understand a child's context, others highlighted that in some cases it was more important for students to be given a 'fresh start' and privacy about their past, because 'their story does not always need to follow them'.

What support do teachers and school leaders need?

Educators and school leaders talked about the kind of support they need to make the above a reality. Some shared a view that 'redirecting of resources to the "middle" rather than "the hard end" is what is required, so that educators are equipped to respond at the right time, before disengagement escalates to the point of total detachment.

This included professional learning and development for all educators to understand:

- childhood and adolescent development

- trauma and how to recognise it in children and young people; and

- behaviour and restorative 'behaviour management' techniques, as well as adopting relational approaches.

Educators also highlighted a need for consistent and ongoing support at a school-wide and system-wide level to:

- build trust and positive relationships with students

- have freedom and opportunities to teach in many different environments beyond the classroom

- identify students at risk of disengagement and provide timely and appropriate support, particularly those with complex social, emotional or health needs or trauma backgrounds; and

- support children and young people who have previously been disengaged to re-engage with peers, educators and the school environment.

School leadership is important when it comes to school engagement, and participants acknowledged that leaders need support to be able to identify strengths and skills as well as knowledge gaps among their teaching staff. In this way they can invest in ensuring practical support and resources that are tailored to the needs of their staff.

School leaders were calling for more trust in their leadership and knowledge of their school's local context so they can make decisions and 'do what's best' for their school community. They wanted to reduce bureaucracy and related barriers, and have the space, support and professional development needed to know about and create new, innovative learning models and environments and experiences, including 'outward bound' models of schooling.

What can mainstream schools learn from FLO and other alternative models?

Stakeholders discussed the challenge of supporting alternative flexible or specialist settings and maintaining the capacity of mainstream schools to be inclusive and engaging for all students.

Mainstream schools should be both expected and supported to use a range of engagement and inclusion resources and strategies to keep the children in their community, connected to school and learning.

Success in mainstream schools must include a 'pedagogy of care', social protection and inclusion for disengaged and disadvantaged young people. This includes ensuring the following:

- young people have a voice about what, where, when, and how learning occurs
- active project-based learning experiences and opportunities that align with student interests and prepare students for 'real life'
- strong connections with local community, businesses, and community services
- individualised case management models that allow for more personalised learning and for children and young people to feel known
- focus on wellbeing, which is considered necessary to engage in 'learning'
- consistency in staff and environments that foster predictability and reliability
- culturally safe environments and practices
- small class sizes and higher numbers of staff per student than is currently available in mainstream schools
- different composition of staff connecting with young people, including social workers, youth workers and volunteers, as well as teachers
- high expectations for all children and young people; and
- celebration of 'small successes', both academic and non-academic, to build young people's confidence, independence, and aspirations for the future.

Mainstream schools that integrate approaches from the FLO model would be schools that are student-centred, open, accepting and celebrating of diversity – where there are positive behaviour management strategies in place and extra support for students and staff.

Ensuring alternative education is an integral part of the education system

Stakeholders wanted to see alternative education as an integral part of the system rather than an 'afterthought' and to ensuring that alternative education is not an alternative *to* education. Stakeholders also felt it was critical for educational pathways to integrate wellbeing and learning, while also providing accreditation that is recognised and meaningful.

Although students enrolled in FLO and specialised assistance schools are offered access to SACE and VET programs, SACE completions and VET outcomes are considerably lower amongst this group of young people. Stakeholders considered such education outcomes to be less about student's willingness or ability and more related to the fact that meaningful accreditation is based on the same requirements and organisation of subjects as those found in mainstream schooling.

Participants discussed the kind of knowledge and skills students should be leaving the education system with, and how this is communicated to others, including accrediting authorities.

What are the key considerations for the Department regarding FLO and alternative education provision?

Participants identified several important things for the Department to consider that they believe will support all educators and leaders across both mainstream and FLO, or other alternative education settings. They said it would be useful if there was:

- a single document that distilled what good practice looks like in terms of student engagement and the practical, holistic and student-centred approaches that are working

- more direct and regular engagement with staff to ensure support matches specific needs and local context

- equity of resources and funding so that every child has resources to meet their potential

- a consistent platform for sharing data between sites

- better understanding of how current iterations of the curriculum can present barriers to holistic and student-centred education at flexible and alternative sites; and

- more support for young people and those working with them, to demonstrate their knowledge and skills to accrediting authorities.

Given the high rates of school exclusions in the early years of school, stakeholders emphasised that programs and support need to start early and that providing alternatives for students aged 16 or 17 years is simply too late. The Australian Early Development Census provides rich data on children at the local level that can help schools shape their programs and services.

How do we support and prepare young people to transition out of school?

Participants considered how to prepare young people to 'exit' the education system and the support they need to successfully navigate their next transition. There was concern that many young people are leaving school without understanding who they are, what their strengths and skills are, and what options are available to them.

Defining success

In discussing the kind of support students need to successfully 'leave to learn', stakeholders considered how schools and the Department define success. As with the definition of 'engagement', they wanted to see a more holistic understanding of 'success' that went beyond academic success and which looked included:

- stability across life domains (including relationships, housing, etc)
- hope and confidence for the future, including knowing what options are available
- seeing the value in what they do
- having strong support networks and trusting relationships with peers and adults
- feeling connected to community and services
- pride and belief in self and valuing self, with permission to take risks and 'to fail'.
- support to move from 'interdependence to independence'; and
- having a 'toolkit' (to overcome challenges, be active and connected citizens); not just a certificate or job.

Some stakeholders thought there needed to be more consultation and engagement with children and young people to better understand their needs and expectations, and the kind of support that will be most useful to them at different stages of their schooling.

Life skills

Schools aim to foster opportunities, relationships and skills that are critical to children and young people's health, safety, wellbeing and aspirations. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of equipping children and young people with practical 'life skills', alongside literacy and numeracy skills. This was seen as key to not only ensuring education is relevant and engaging, but also as a fundamental part of supporting a young person's successful transition out of the education system and being a school student and into adulthood and other engaging learning activities related to work or self-development or both.

Comprehensive 'life skills' education taught at school would ideally include financial literacy, 'life administrative' skills (and 'how to adult') as well as 'soft' interpersonal skills. This includes providing

support for all young people to access and confidently navigate important services and systems including some or all of the following:

- preparing for employment, including writing job applications and curriculum vitae as well as preparing for job interviews
- opening a bank account and everyday budgeting
- navigating government support services such as Centrelink, Medicare and others
- managing and paying bills
- lodging a tax return
- applying for an ID or drivers' licence; and
- living independently.

Learning these skills will allow young people to leave school with more than a certificate or a job, but with a 'toolkit' that will help them overcome challenges, collaborate with others, and be active, informed and connected citizens. This in turn has positive effects on their self-worth, self-confidence and self-efficacy, as well as confidence for the future.

Connecting with community services and employers

Stakeholders discussed the importance of building young people's awareness of the full range of educational and vocational pathways and options available to them beyond school. This included information about opportunities for training, traineeships and apprenticeships, and employment and further education, including where to find information on alternative learning pathways, foundation courses and other ways to get into university.

Bridging schools to community – including to service providers, education institutions, training providers and businesses – was seen as essential to building young people's experiences and their personal and professional pathways and support networks. These links to community, services and businesses can provide young people with the connections, opportunities and work experiences that will help them to reach their goals.

Young people also need to know where they can go for this information and support. This includes sourcing information about housing, banking and financial support services as well as referral to external mental health support and other places that will enable them to build connections and have a sense of belonging that exists outside of school.

Particular attention should be given to increasing the support and connections available to specific groups of students who face particular barriers to education. These children include students who are in out-of-home care, as well as students who have had contact with the youth justice system.

Some stakeholders highlighted the need to recognise that people over 18 years want to re-engage with their education and require support to do so. Active alumni groups were also raised as providing connection and opportunities for employment or work experience post school.

[i] Graham et al. 2020. Inquiry into Suspension, Exclusion and Expulsion Processes in South Australian government schools: Final Report. The Centre for Inclusive Education, QUT: Brisbane, QLD. Available at https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/report-of-an-independent-inquiry-into-suspensions-exclusions-and-expulsions-in-south-australian-government-schools.pdf.

[ii] Connolly, Helen. Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia. 2020. The Blame Game: Perspectives from South Australian children and young people on the causes and impact of education exclusion and why we need to stop blaming children for system failure. Available at https://www.ccyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-Blame-Game-The-perspectives-of-South-Australian-children-and-young-people-on-the-causes-and-impacts-of-education-exclusion-and-why-we-need-to-stop-blaming-children-for-system-failure.pdf.

[iii] Connolly, Helen. Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia. 2021. Keeping Kids Connected to Learning and Schooling Summit: Feedback Report. Available at https://www.ccyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Keeping-Kids-Connected-to-Learning-and-Schooling.pdf.

[iv] Department for Education, Government of South Australia. 'Behaviour and engagement reform'. Updated November 2021. https://edi.sa.edu.au/supporting-children/behaviour-and-attendance/behaviour-and-engagement-reform. For a more recent update, Hansard, Parliament of South Australia. 22 June 2022, Estimates Committee A: Department for Education. Available at http://hansardpublic.parliament.sa.gov.au/Pages/DateDisplay.aspx#/DateDisplay/HANSARD-5-729/HANSARD-5-727.

[v] Connolly, Helen. Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia. 2020. Press Play: Activating young people's health and wellbeing through play. Available at https://www.ccyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Press-Play-Activating-Young-Peoples-Health-and-Wellbeing-Through-Play.pdf.