



Preparing students for the transition to work or further study

Engaging Students: Building Aspirations

Summary Report



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Executive Summary

This report provides a summary of the literature review that was developed to assist with the creation of an evidence-based model to better support students in Years 8–10 (13–16 years) as they progress through school and into work or further study. The literature review addresses two key questions:

- *What are the essential skills, capacities, relationships and attributes that Year 8–10 students require in the family/home, community and secondary school settings that prepare students for the transition into further education/work?*
- *What are national and international examples of best practice initiatives that support and prepare students in Years 8 and 9?*

What does the research tell us?

Adolescent development

- If a young person's health and wellbeing needs are not met this impacts upon their ability to form positive and supportive relationships. On a basic level this influences an individual's ability to concentrate and be fully engaged in their education and this in turn affects their aspirations.
- Positive parent and peer relationships have an important impact upon social and emotional development (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009). Research also highlights the importance of regular school communication with parents to promote positive interactions (Ma, 2007).
- There are no widely agreed indicators of social and emotional wellbeing (Hamilton & Redmond, 2010). Wellbeing is shaped by physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual factors. In addition, the social, material and natural contexts surrounding an individual contribute to their wellbeing (ABS, 2001). However, applied research on social and emotional wellbeing tends to focus on negative behaviours of individuals including substance abuse and risk-taking behaviour (Hamilton & Redmond, 2010).
- Mental health is one of many aspects influencing wellbeing and an individual's wellbeing is also linked to their mental health.

Education, health and disadvantage

- Young people from families without regular, adequate incomes are at greater risk of experiencing poor health and educational outcomes (AIHW, 2008).
- Recent statistics highlight that 16% of people in the "most disadvantaged areas" had a "mental or behavioural problem" compared to 11% of people in the "least disadvantaged areas" (ABS, 2010, p.3).
- Problems associated with youth mental disorders include "school failure, impaired or unstable employment, and poor family

and social functioning, leading to spirals of dysfunction and disadvantage that are difficult to reverse" (McGorry, Purcell, Hickie & Jorm, 2007, p.S5).

- Australian PISA* results highlight the impact of disadvantage on education — almost a quarter of students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile "failed to achieve" the minimum proficiency levels in "scientific, reading or mathematical literacy" (Thomson & De Bortoli, 2007, p.15).

Young people's skill development

- Proficiency in literacy and numeracy directly influences participation in post-compulsory education (Khoo & Ainley, 2005).
- The National Curriculum emphasises: literacy and numeracy, communication technologies, logical thinking, evaluating evidence, creativity and the ability to solve problems (MCEETYA, 2008).
- The *Compact with Young Australians* aims to ensure that young people are learning or earning (DEEWR, 2009).

Developing realistic aspirations

- 11–14 years is the time young people tend to shift to "more realistic ambitions" (Cuthbert & Hatch, 2009, p.7).
- Academic achievement has a significant influence on student aspirations. Leaving school early is linked with poor academic performance (Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers & Rumberger, 2004).
- There is evidence of a gap between aspirations and education outcomes. Disadvantaged young people are more likely to experience this gap (Gutman & Akerman, 2008; DCSF, 2008; Bowden & Doughney, 2010).
- Some young adolescents possess unrealistic career aspirations and have limited knowledge about how to achieve these aspirations (Atherton, Cymbir, Roberts, Page & Remedios, 2009).

* Programme for International Student Assessment



Facilitating the engagement of young people

- Student engagement drops during adolescence (13–16 years) (Thomson, Wernert, Underwood & Nicholas, 2007).
- Disengagement is a result of cumulative challenges that students face in the home, school and community (Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes & Milburn, 2009).
- Intentions have stronger associations with continuing to Year 12 than any aspect of student background. Intentions are influenced by both attitudes to school and academic achievement (Khoo & Ainley, 2005).
- Quality relationships formed at school with peers and teachers are positively linked to student engagement (Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes & Milburn, 2009).
- Involvement in extra-curricular activities can positively influence engagement (Taylor & Nelms, 2006; Fullarton, 2002).

Disadvantaged students: barriers to aspirations and engagement

- The costs associated with full participation in public education are a significant obstacle for low-income families and their children, effectively excluding them from some extra-curricular activities and also impacting upon academic performance (Bond & Horn, 2009).
- Parental influence in shaping the aspirations and engagement of young people is mediated by socio-economic status including; their level of education, their attitudes to school and the broader community context (Cuthbert & Hatch, 2009).
- Communities with limited social networks contribute to the limited aspirations of disadvantaged young people (Cuthbert & Hatch, 2009).
- Young people's attitudes and behaviours appear to have a stronger impact on their education outcomes than both parental attitudes and behaviours, and material resources in the home (Chowdry, Crawford & Goodman, 2009).

Recommendations: What are the implications of the research for policy and practice?

In developing a model to better support students in Years 8–10 as they progress through school and into work or further study, it is critical to address the social and financial obstacles to engagement and academic achievement that young people face, which often exclude them from full participation in public education.

In particular, positive and supportive relationships are important for a broad range of factors associated with young people's development including their academic achievement, engagement, aspirations, retention and career planning. An overview, drawn from the literature, follows, highlighting the essential skills, capacities, relationships and attributes that Year 8–10 students require to prepare them for the transition to further education/work.

Skills

- Address student achievement - particularly literacy and numeracy - in the middle years to facilitate improved higher education outcomes for disadvantaged students (Khoo & Ainley, 2005).
- Address the needs of younger disadvantaged students by targeting academic performance through initiatives such as homework assistance (Maani & Kalb, 2007).
- Promote young people's career-planning skills and facilitate their development of career aspirations.
- Develop young people's optimism and self-esteem to help them become

confident young people who feel equipped to achieve their goals and cope with disappointments (Cuthbert & Hatch, 2009).

- Equip students (13–16 years) with effective social skills, coping and problem-solving strategies to help them develop and maintain positive relationships with peers, parents and teachers.
- Assist students to develop their time management, organisational and study skills to cope with an increasingly demanding curriculum and with assessment tasks.

Capacities

- Develop young people's resilience, an essential requirement to help them cope with major changes and events in their lives. (Knight, 2007).
- Facilitate the development of young people's intentions to continue to Year 12.
- Develop student confidence, self-esteem, perceptions about their abilities, general health and motivation because of the link between these factors and academic performance. Physical health includes sufficient physical activity and a healthy diet that incorporates adequate consumption of fruit and vegetables.
- Address career ignorance early in secondary school to enable students to develop their capacity to understand the link between school success and post-school options (Frigo, Bryce, Anderson & McKenzie, 2007; Sullivan, Mornane, Prain, Campbell, Deed, Drane et al., 2009).

Relationships and attributes

Family/home

- Inform parents about the impact of their parenting style on their children's



development and academic achievement during adolescence. Help parents understand that an adolescent's degree of confidence and security in their other relationships is shaped by relationships with their parents (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009).

- Assist parents with the development of their children's aspirations and attitudes from an early age (Atherton, Cymbir, Roberts, Page & Remedios, 2009).
- Provide students and their families with access to quality career guidance to inform them about opportunities, alternative pathways and the consequences of not completing school (Curtis & McMillan, 2008).
- Assist low-income families and their children to meet the costs of full participation in the public education system.

School and community

- Recognise the links between favourable attitudes to school, intentions for continuing in education and actually continuing in education (Fullarton, 2002).
- Provide students with effective, targeted and accurate career education. Ongoing support for disadvantaged young people is vital. They may also require a tutor or mentor to assist with motivation and aspiration development (Janeiro, 2010; Curtis & McMillan, 2008; Gutman & Akerman, 2008).
- Offer a range of enjoyable extra-curricular activities to help foster student engagement (Taylor & Nelms, 2006).
- Address student engagement by nurturing the development of positive attitudes to school in the middle and



early years of high school (Fullarton, 2002).

- Provide students with access to supportive adults in the broader community through initiatives such as mentoring and parental education programs that develop parents' knowledge and skills (Woolley & Bowen, 2007).
- Help communities to develop social networks that reach out beyond the local neighbourhood to provide disadvantaged children and young people with a diverse range of contacts, inspiration, information and opportunities to help develop their aspirations (Cuthbert & Hatch, 2009).
- Provide students with learning opportunities that are supportive, challenging and relevant to their lives to give them opportunities to succeed, stay engaged and work towards their aspirations (Maras, 2007).

The research highlights that young people from families without regular, adequate incomes are at greater risk of experiencing poor health and educational outcomes. Further, the costs associated with full participation in public education are a significant obstacle for low-income families and their children, effectively excluding them from some extra-curricular activities and also impacting upon academic performance. It is clear that positive and supportive relationships are important for the development of a broad range of young people's skills, capacities, relationships and attributes. However, the most effective approaches for supporting students in Years 8–10 as they progress through school and into work or further study will be multi-dimensional and multi-faceted.

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