

Executive summary

The link between young people's engagement with school and their longer-term educational and occupational outcomes is well established. Students who are engaged with their schooling perform better academically, have higher rates of school completion and end up in better jobs.

The key policy question then becomes the extent to which student engagement can be strengthened by the way in which schools are set up and run. It is possible that school characteristics, such as a school's demographic makeup, control over resources, or the quality of teachers and principals, can influence the degree to which students feel engaged with school. Likewise, student engagement might be affected by parental and peer influences. For instance, students may change the way they think about school as a result of parental pressure or their peers' educational and occupational aspirations.

This report focuses on the extent to which school characteristics can influence the emotional and cognitive engagement of high school students, over and above their characteristics. It does so using data from the 2009 cohort of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY Y09), which contains information on numerous student and school attributes, as well as proxy variables for students' emotional and cognitive engagement at age 15 years.

The results show that, at age 15 years, school characteristics have only a minimal impact on students' emotional and cognitive engagement with school. Once students' individual background characteristics are taken into consideration, the characteristics of the schools they attend account for 4.3% of their emotional engagement and 7.5% of their cognitive engagement.

It seems that students' emotional and cognitive engagement is overwhelmingly driven by individual background factors. Students who intend to complete Year 12 and those who are foreign-born are more emotionally and cognitively engaged at age 15 years, while students with low self-concept of ability have low levels of cognitive and emotional engagement. Other influential individual factors include academic achievement, socioeconomic status, Indigenous status, speaking a language other than English at home, the number of work hours outside school and family structure. Male students are distinctly less cognitively engaged than females.

Some school characteristics do positively influence the engagement levels of 15-year-olds over and above their individual background characteristics. These characteristics include non-metropolitan school location, teacher quality being perceived as high, and high average academic performance of the student body. Yet it is important to note that, while these attributes are statistically significant, the size of their effect is small.

The study also examines the possibility that school characteristics play a stronger role in the engagement of students who are at risk of early school leaving. However, the additional analysis reveals that the overall amount of variance attributable to school factors is even smaller for the sub-sample of at-risk students. For at-risk students, school characteristics account for 1.4% and 4.4% of emotional and cognitive engagement, respectively. Even though a few school characteristics, such as teacher participation in school decisions, perceived teacher quality, academic performance of the student body and the academic selectivity of the school, emerge as statistically significant, their actual effects are negligible when compared with the impact of statistically significant student-level predictors.

Overall, the results paint a sobering picture about the ability of school attributes – such as school sector and demographics, resourcing, competition and academic orientation, school leadership and teacher quality, and the overall school climate – to raise the engagement levels of 15-year-olds. It seems that by this age the die has been cast. However, not all is doom and gloom. Recent research indicates that students’ engagement with school is dynamic, with engagement being stronger at younger ages. It is therefore possible that school characteristics have a stronger and more practically meaningful effect on student engagement during the earlier years of schooling.