

# About the research

## *Do schools influence student engagement in the high school years?*

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The link between young people's engagement with school and their longer-term education and labour market outcomes is well established. The key policy question is the extent to which student engagement can be influenced by the manner in which schools are organised and run. This report uses data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) to examine a wide range of school characteristics and their impact on students' emotional and cognitive engagement with school at age 15 years.

### Key messages

- At age 15 years, students' emotional and cognitive engagement with school is overwhelmingly driven by individual background characteristics.
- Important individual predictors of higher engagement levels include having the intention to complete Year 12, performing strong academically, having a high self-concept of ability, being foreign-born, coming from a high socioeconomic status background, speaking a language other than English at home, working only relatively few hours outside school, and coming from a traditional nuclear family. A distinct gender gap exists, with male students showing significantly lower cognitive engagement levels than their female peers.
- Once individual background factors are controlled for, school attributes have very little impact on the engagement levels of 15-year-olds. By school attributes we mean school sector and demographics, resourcing, competition and academic orientation, school leadership and teacher quality, and the overall school climate. These school characteristics account for 4.3% of students' emotional engagement and 7.5% of their cognitive engagement.
- Some school characteristics that positively influence student engagement include non-metropolitan school location, a perception of high teacher quality, and the high average academic achievement of the student body. Yet, while these characteristics are statistically significant, their effect is small and not necessarily practically meaningful.
- Schools matter even less for 15-year-olds who are at risk of early school leaving. For these at-risk students, school characteristics account for 1.4% and 4.4% of emotional and cognitive engagement, respectively.
- Overall, the results from this study paint a sobering picture about the ability of school attributes to raise the engagement levels of 15-year-olds. It seems that by this age 'the die has been cast'.
- It is premature to conclude, however, that school characteristics have no bearing on student engagement in general. It is very possible that the impact of school factors on students' engagement levels occurs at a younger age.

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