Best practice methods for retaining students in regional, rural, and remote areas to Year 12

IPS Management Consultants

Acknowledgement

This report was created on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation.

IPS Management Consultants acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to land, water, and community. We pay our respects to Elders both past and present, and we extend that respect to all First Nations people.

We are grateful to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities we have the privilege of working with, for sharing stories, values, beliefs, and culture.

In the spirit of acknowledging the importance of First Nations education and knowledge, we recognise the rich tapestry of wisdom woven into the songlines, lore, histories, and cultures of First Nations people. Their ways of learning are integral to the broader discourse on education, and the resilience and depth of First Nations knowledge systems form an essential foundation for understanding and addressing the opportunities for improving student retention in regional, rural, and remote Australia.

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Glossary of terms

Term	Explanation
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
Curriculum	The structured set of educational plans and materials designed to guide learning in schools. It includes subjects, content, and activities aimed at achieving specific learning objectives.
First Nations knowledge	The traditional and cumulative knowledge passed through generations of First Nations people. It encompasses a range of fields, such as ecology, medicine, environmental management, culture, spirituality, agriculture, history and astronomy.
RRR	Regional, rural, and remote
Student cost-benefit analysis of schooling	The evaluation that a student makes of whether school attendance, engagement, or completion is a worthwhile investment of their time. It refers to both social and financial considerations.

Section 1
Executive summary

Introduction

Retaining students through to school completion has been shown to be essential in improving the employability, wellbeing, economic outcomes, and overall integration of young people as they progress in society (Allen et al., 2018). On a global scale, the link between wealth and student completion of school shows better outcomes for students who are economically advantaged and thus have more educational choices in terms of number, quality, and support to complete their schooling (Allen et al., 2018). Additionally, student retention has been shown to have a positive social, cultural, and economic influence on an individual's broader society as well as themselves (Allen et al., 2018; Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, 2018). Australian studies echo these international findings, with students who complete Year 12 more likely to earn higher incomes and have better overall health and wellbeing outcomes (Lamb and Huo, 2017).

This report is situated within a broader context of federal, state and territory government reviews looking to improve the educational attainment of young people across Australia. More specifically, this project is informed by the final report of the National Regional, Rural, and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Napthine Review), released on 28 August 2019. The Napthine Review highlighted a clear city-country divide in participation and attainment rates for tertiary education, with those living in regional and remote (RRR) areas being less than half as likely as their city counterparts to obtain a university degree by the time they are 35. The Napthine Review also highlighted that students from RRR areas face additional challenges in successfully transitioning to university or a vocational education and training (VET) provider and completing their studies.

Specifically, using 2016 census data, the Napthine Review reported that approximately 80% of people in major cities completed Year 12, compared to 66.4% for inner regional locations, 63.9% for outer regional locations, and 48.5% for remote locations (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). More recent data shows that metropolitan attainment rates have increased to 82%, compared to 72% for inner and outer regional areas, 73% in remote areas, and 51% in very remote areas (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2023). This shows that although there have been overall improvements in attainment rates, especially in regional areas, very remote areas continue to need support and metropolitan areas continue to be higher than non-metropolitan areas.

This report responds to Recommendation Four, Action 21 of the Napthine Review, which was to examine best practice in RRR schools to engage and retain students until Year 12. IPS was contracted by the Australian Government Department of Education (the Department) to examine the extent to which strategies and approaches influence the engagement and retention of RRR students to Year 12, including the identification of common characteristics and consideration of unique needs of different student groups.

Scope of works

Working in collaboration with the Department, IPS undertook consultations with key stakeholders including state and territory education authorities, school principals and staff, peak body groups, students, and other organisations that worked with the target cohort to support students with completing their schooling. Engagements focused on understanding student experiences, intentions, and views about approaching and completing Year 12.

These engagements, in conjunction with an online survey for school staff and a comprehensive literature review, enabled IPS to propose methods for scaling-up approaches across Australian RRR schools and to develop case studies demonstrating effective practice. Case studies considered a broad range of factors including teaching practice, curriculum relevance, the transition from Year 10 to Year 12, visibility of post-

secondary pathways and career advice, support services offered, cultural diversity, student wellbeing and support services provided, digital literacy and accessibility, boarding schools, and the availability of senior subjects.

A First Nations Reference Group was established to ensure input into project design, analysis, and use. However, due to timing constraints, this group was not able to provide consistent input into the project.

Methodology

Ethics and research applications

Once the interview questions and stakeholder groups were confirmed by the Department, IPS prepared and submitted an ethics application to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). After resubmission, AIATSIS approved the research on 5 July 2023.

Following ethics approval from AIATSIS (REC-0132), IPS prepared and submitted research approvals to state, territory, and Catholic diocese research bodies. Independent schools were contacted individually, and participation was at the individual school's discretion. A list of approvals with the date of initial submission and date of approval has been included below, and proof of approval has been included in Appendix 5: Received ethics and research approvals.

Table 1: List of ethics approvals submitted and received by IPS.

Research body	Date of initial submission	Date of approval
AIATSIS (HREC)	22 March 2023	5 July 2023
Catholic Education Western Australia	22 March 2023	28 July 2023
Catholic Schools South Australia	19 July 2023	22 August 2023
Diocese of Armidale	22 March 2023	28 July 2023
Diocese of Bathurst	22 March 2023	27 September 2023
Northern Territory Department of Education	22 March 2023	11 September 2023
Queensland Department of Education	22 March 2023	20 October 2023
Townsville Catholic Education	22 March 2023	29 August 2023

Engagement summary

Engagements for the research included one-on-one interviews, focus group interviews, and an online survey. Stakeholders invited to be interviewed included education authorities such as state ministers, secondary stakeholders such as peak body organisations, principals and staff of RRR schools, current students in Year 9 to Year 12, and past students who did not complete Year 12. Engagements occurred between 8 August 2023 and 10 November 2023.

Engagements with stakeholders were conducted remotely. One-on-one interviews were conducted via phone call, and interviews with two or more people were conducted using Microsoft Teams.

A total of 46 people provided responses over 27 one-on-one phone interviews and 4 virtual focus groups. Of the 49 people who began the survey, 27 completed all questions.

Table 2: Descriptions of stakeholder types

Stakeholder type	Description of stakeholder type	Number of individuals
Current students	• Current students in Year 9 to Year 12, who attend RRR schools	2
Education authority	• State ministers • Department of Education representatives from various states • Catholic diocese representatives • Teaching group representatives • First Nations community leaders	17
Secondary stakeholders	• Peak body and not-for-profit organisation representatives, who work with RRR schools and/or students • Teaching staff who had worked across multiple RRR schools, and were speaking about their experience broadly	19
School staff	• Teachers, principals, and other school staff from RRR schools that teach to Year 12, speaking about their experience at that specific school	8
Survey respondents	• School staff from RRR areas who had access to the survey link	27 complete, 22 partial

Analysis and reporting

Analysis involved both an extensive literature review and thematic qualitative analysis from interviews, focus groups, and an online survey. Case studies and examples of best practice have been developed from amalgamated stakeholder interviews to maintain the confidentiality of individuals.

This report has been provided to the Department in its entirety. An infographic summarising key findings from the report will be shared with all relevant stakeholders, including ethics and research bodies who provided approval to conduct the research.

Limitations

Limitations of the research project are outlined in Appendix 4: Methodology. Primarily, multiple levels of ethics and research approval being required for engagement, as well as delays in obtaining these approvals, impacted the capacity for the research team to fully engage with all planned stakeholders. For example, student engagement was impacted by the delays as it caused the engagement period to overlap with end-of-year exams, which subsequently made schools less likely to pass on information about the research to students. As a result, only two students were able to be interviewed, severely hindering the level of student input into retention efforts and policies that could directly affect them.

Technological access was also a significant limitation. Because participation invitations were distributed through email, and all interviews were conducted remotely, internet and phone connection were required to participate. This could potentially exclude communities in remote areas where connectivity might be limited.

Findings

The first set of significant findings relate to the need to frame the discussion on student retention in RRR schools. Stakeholders noted that the idea that there is a "best practice" approaches for improving retention is ultimately flawed because of how distinct RRR schools are from one another. Stakeholders suggested the

terms "good practice" or "great practice" in its place and raised that the effectiveness of retention strategies generally depended on a school's agency and ability to tailor the approach for their local context, including student body, school environment, and wider community.

Findings were then categorised into primary and secondary factors based on how frequently stakeholders raised them in interviews, focus groups, or the online survey. Primary factors were mentioned by at least half of all participants, while secondary factors were less prevalent but still identified as significant.

The most discussed factor affecting student retention in RRR schools was a student's cost-benefit analysis of schooling. This is the cost-benefit analyses regarding how a student has experienced learning and the overall school environment, and was seen to be affected by competing priorities, confidence, a student's relationship with their teacher, and the value they placed on education. This was followed by factors relating to teaching staff, typically staff availability, quality, and retention.

Other primary factors included engaging with local community, the opportunities available for students, parent or family influence, student wellbeing, and travel or distance. Secondary factors included early intervention, gendered expectations, legal access to alcohol, mentoring, funding equity, and online learning/distance education.

Recommendations for scaling up effective strategies

Stakeholders were apprehensive about the prospect of scaling-up specific effective strategies that are currently used in individual RRR locations to be applied at a national level. This was due to a sense that scaling-up nationally would lead towards a blanket 'one-size-fits-all' approach that would struggle to accommodate the unique contexts that schools in RRR areas operate in. This indicates that the perspectives of people working 'on-the-ground' differed from general government perspectives. While governments might perceive a national approach as allowing for greater cohesion, standardisation, cost monitoring, and efficiency of delivery, people more directly working with RRR schools, students, and communities felt that a scaled-up national approach was not attractive from an outcome perspective.

In speaking about these challenges to scaling-up approaches, stakeholders highlighted an on-the-ground desire for adaptable, broad support for schools that maintain the school's agency and recognises them as the best decision makers when it comes to understanding and supporting their students, families, and community. At the same time, they raised that a singular approach or strategy is insufficient for addressing regional, rural, and remote retention rates at a national level, cautioning against a one-size-fits-all mentality.

Considering these points, the proposal for a scaled-up national approach to student retention is to provide a broad, value-driven scaffolding consisting of five key areas that together take a holistic approach to school support for student retention in RRR communities. These areas are:

- connection to culture and community
- education support
- providing opportunity
- staff wellbeing
- student wellbeing

The scaffolding is designed to empower and support RRR schools to engage with strategies that sit within these five key areas, while maintaining the school's agency and allowing them to tailor retention-focused approaches to suit the needs of their student body, school environment, and community context. The strength

of a scaffolding approach lies in its ability to help schools with selecting activities that are relevant to their gaps in retention support, while also being flexible enough to support schools with adapting and implementing the activity delivery for greater effectiveness.

List of recommendations

These recommendations are proposed to address the five key areas of the scaffolding for a holistic, national response to RRR student retention. They are informed by stakeholder views and experiences that were gathered through interview and survey responses.

Overarching recommendations

Recommendation 1: To reflect that there is no one-size-fits-all solution that can be nationally applied to improve RRR student retention, consider using the terms "good practice" or "great practice" instead of "best practice".

Recommendation 2: Ensure that RRR schools are given the independence to select, modify, and implement the strategies and approaches that would best suit the needs of their student body, school community, and wider community context.

Recommendations to improve connection to culture and community

Recommendation 3: Create incentives for RRR schools to implement practices or strategies that encourage cultural safety, celebration, and connection, and which are holistically embedded within the school community.

Recommendation 4: Develop guidelines to assist RRR teaching staff with tailoring curriculum content and delivery so that students are better able to see how their education is relevant to their lived experience. For example, engaging with local issues, modifying course content so that it is applicable to the student's experience within their community, or teaching outside of school grounds to increase attendance.

Recommendations to improve education support

Recommendation 5: Build the capacity of new teaching graduates so that they are better equipped to provide a culturally safe learning environment and to deliver curriculum content to culturally and linguistically diverse RRR students.

Recommendation 6: Empower RRR schools to experiment with innovative teaching approaches that better respond to the learning needs of their student body. For example, through implementing vertical curriculum structures, non-traditional assessment methods, or adapting curriculum delivery.

Recommendation 7: Develop programs or content that encourages RRR families to have positive views of schooling, fostering a supportive learning environment in the home. For example, through targeted media advertising.

Recommendations to improve providing opportunity

Recommendation 8: Support the capacity of RRR schools to provide online learning options for their students so that they can access subjects aligned with their interests. For example, through improved digital infrastructure, device availability, or making it easier to access online learning courses.

Recommendation 9:   Support RRR schools to provide students with greater visibility of their potential career pathways and post-school options. For example, by facilitating active engagement with local universities or TAFE, mentorship or work-based placements, allocating funding for schools to be better equipped to hire career advisors or train staff to fill these roles, or reimbursements for excursions or trips to metropolitan areas.

Recommendations to improve staff wellbeing

Recommendation 10:   Encourage and empower RRR schools to implement programs that prioritise the social, emotional, and physical wellbeing of school staff, for example those that improve work-life balance or by strengthening initiatives that support the mental health of RRR staff.

Recommendation 11:   Create incentives for staff to relocate to RRR areas long-term, such as through assisting with housing, utilities, or other remuneration for cost-of-living expenses.

Recommendation 12:   Encourage and support RRR schools with providing professional development programs, including cultural competency, mentorship, or leadership training.

Recommendations to improve student wellbeing

Recommendation 13:   Empower and assist RRR schools to address student social, emotional, and physical wellbeing needs, such as by having a central mental support hub, supporting access to online counselling, or minimising barriers and wait times for RRR families seeking to access health specialists.

Section 2
Framing the discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to assist the Australian Government Department of Education with understanding the barriers to and associated strategies for improving student retention in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) areas. This report uses the same definition of regional, rural, and remote as the Halsey review, that being the areas which are not located in the major cities of Australia (Halsey, 2017). The coming sections of this report will examine the impact that various factors have on student retention, as well as any strategies that were noted by stakeholders and survey respondents that created solutions that addressed those factors.

Using 2016 census data, the Napthine Review reported that approximately 80% of people in major cities completed Year 12, compared to 66.4% for inner regional locations, 63.9% for outer regional locations, and 48.5% for remote locations (Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, 2019). More recent data shows that metropolitan attainment rates have increased to 82%, compared to 72% for inner and outer regional areas, 73% in remote areas, and 51% in very remote areas (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2023). This shows that although there have been overall improvements in attainment rates, especially in regional areas, very remote areas continue to need support and metropolitan areas continue to be higher than non-metropolitan areas.

Retaining students through to school completion has been shown to be essential in improving the employability, wellbeing, economic outcomes, and overall integration of young people as they progress in society (Allen et al., 2018). Additionally, student retention has been shown to have a positive social, cultural, and economic influence on an individual's broader society as well as themselves (Allen et al., 2018; Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, 2018). Australian studies echo these international findings, with students who complete Year 12 more likely to earn higher incomes and have better overall health and wellbeing outcomes (Lamb and Huo, 2017).

This section will cover several themes that were raised through engagements with stakeholders. These are typically broader concepts, rather than specific strategies and approaches, that provide context and are important to consider throughout the rest of the report. These broader concepts represent the considerations that individuals working "on the ground" deem essential in conversations about retention, as well as in formulating future strategies to enhance RRR student retention through to Year 12.

Specifically, this section will examine the validity of using the term "best practice" to discuss strategies and approaches for improving retention, the significance of identifying how unique contextual factors of regional, rural, and remote settings impact retention, the importance of a First Nations-specific lens, and definition of success.

The validity of "best practice" as terminology

Stakeholders suggested that the idea there is a "best practice" for student retention is flawed, because of how unique an individual school's context is in regional, rural, and remote areas. Alternative terms that were recommended by stakeholders included "good practice" or "great practice", to emphasise that there is no one-size-fits-all solution that can be applied nationally to address student retention to Year 12.

> "The ideas that there is best practice retention of students is incorrect. What you'll see is that retention is a highly complex and localised factor. In that sense it's not possible to isolate best practice."
> Education authority

The importance of considering context when scaling-up approaches

Schools in RRR areas operate in a unique context from one another, which has been discussed in existing reports such as the Halsey and Napthine reviews. This was mirrored in differences between the staff survey respondents and interviewee responses when asked to describe RRR student retention to Year 12. While most survey responses felt that student retention was "neutral", "good", or "very good", most interviewee responses felt negatively about retention. It should be noted that only school staff could participate in the survey, while interviewee responses were drawn from a wider range of people involved in improving RRR student retention.

Figure 1: Comparison of interview responses to survey responses regarding student retention.

Interview responses

| 55% | 19% | 26% |

Survey responses

| 6% | 26% | 21% | 41% | 6% |

Very Poor | Poor | Neutral/no answer | Good | Very Good

The lack of consensus about the state of student retention in RRR areas indicates that the type of support required, or the intensity of the support needed, is dependent on location and contextual factors, even within the same state.

Stakeholders also stressed that strategies and approaches to improving student retention were most effective when they were highly localised to the school and broader community, as well as designed to meet the needs of individual students and the overall student body. Because each of these communities and school environments operates in a unique context, creating a scaled-up national approach has its own barriers. Namely, that there is no single approach that could be applied to all RRR schools.

For example, some schools in the remote Northern Territory experience drops in student attendance because of seasonal events like flooding, which physically separate students from the school environment for several months at a time. Some of these affected schools have found success by adjusting their school calendar to match the First Nations calendar instead of Gregorian, so that their school holidays would align with the months where physical access to the school was limited. However, this approach may not affect student attendance in regional Northern Territory, where weather may not have the same degree of impact on retention. Likewise, strategies to improve retention in regional Northern Territory may not be translatable to the remote Northern Territory.

> "In the independent sector we have such diversity and across Australia we have such diversity and to compare remote area to even a regional area, it's not possible. So, I think you would have to look at individual school contexts and what do they say is working." Education authority

The different perceptions of student retention speak to the unique context of schools in RRR areas, as both the type and the intensity of support that schools might feel they need will vary on a case-by-case basis. As such, the idea that each school in a RRR area operates in a unique context is important to remember for the following sections of this report, as they will ultimately inform the broader scaled-up approach that is proposed in Section 4.

Recommendation 2: Ensure that RRR schools are given the independence to select, modify, and implement the strategies and approaches that would best suit the needs of their student body, school community, and wider community context.

The First Nations lens

The lack of decision-making power afforded to First Nations people in education matters is a core part of the gap in education progress and outcomes. The traditional knowledge and cultural expressions of First Nations people is still considered in many forums as an optional input and add-on, and true progress cannot occur without redistribution of decision-making powers. Recognition of the lived experience of First Nations people is vital to enabling real change.

An emphasis on "two-way" or "both-way" education is an important concept for framing any intervention regarding student retention. This approach to education ensures that First Nations students are supported to build knowledge of Western concepts and literacy together with First Nations cultural, historic, and social knowledge (Harrison et al., 2019). Traditional First Nations knowledge often centres around meaningful engagement with Country, and should not be an optional add-on or operationalised for Western measures of student success (Moodie et al., 2021).

Some stakeholders held similar opinions, identifying that for true progress in First Nations student retention outcomes, curriculum and school structures need to be tailored through a First Nations lens by taking an active, culturally safe approach.

> "We've said, years ago, why can't the Department accept oral reports from people with poor literacy. They can speak to the situation, but no, you have to bring non-Indigenous people in, who, just by filtering that story and writing it down, will change it because it's going through different translations of mindsets." School staff

> "All of our curriculum is two-way curriculum, so every subject that we teach is taught parallel to Indigenous Knowledges lens and try and incorporate as much local content as possible. And that applies to the middle years and senior years, as well." School staff

It should be noted that strategies and approaches related to First Nations knowledge and experiences were discussed by a wide range of stakeholders, regardless of their personal cultural identity, and were viewed as beneficial to both First Nations and non-Indigenous RRR students.

Definitions of success

A large majority of stakeholders held the view that academic retention was an insufficient measurement of student success, and that success should instead be localised for each individual student based on the pathway that was best suited for them. These respondents discussed that a "traditional" view of success would be largely academically focused, such as being linked to receiving a Senior Secondary Certificate for the relevant state.

Alternative measurements of success identified by respondents included returning to Country or community, entry into vocational education, increasing literacy or numeracy skills where this was previously a struggle, or entering the workforce. In identifying returning to Country or community, some stakeholders acknowledged that viewing success through a First Nations lens was more appropriate than maintaining "traditional" views of success. Regarding vocational education and entering the workforce, stakeholders noted that it is important to consider these as the next phase of RRR student learning, and that their willingness to continue developing their skillset should also be considered as a measure of success.

It is important to note that, while there are nationally agreed targets that include definitions of success beyond Year 12 completion, stakeholders did not refer to these and instead focused on the need to reconsider and broaden what RRR student success could be. This implies that retention is still viewed as the key metric of success for RRR students.

> "I think Year 12 retention overall could be the wrong measure of success. Many students I know who do leave the school system, do go into further education. I think we need to consider that the traditional school environment doesn't quite work for everyone necessarily." Secondary stakeholder

> "Success in the school communities, what the dialogue we have, is students exiting to the pathway of their choice at the time they choose it." Education authority

> "Senior school is ideal but not for everyone." Survey respondent

However, stakeholders also acknowledged that from a data capture perspective, academic outcomes such as ATAR or Senior Secondary Certificate attainment are easier and less labour intensive to capture and monitor compared to more personalised measurements of success, such as entering the workforce.

> "It's not just the academic or post-school destination, it's how a young person conducts themselves once they've left." Education authority

Some stakeholders also identified that in particular, language around success can shape broadly held views on the expected outcomes for RRR education.

> "You look at the reporting in the media, and all the rural schools are deficit, they're behind city schools, all that sort of deficit thinking. I think that infiltrates local rural parents and they go, 'oh, we're buggered anyway'. They lose that aspiration for the best that they can give their kid because of what they're hearing and because of where they live. I'd love to flip that and go, you know what, if we had the resources that we need, we could achieve whatever we want." Secondary stakeholder

Section 3
Primary factors that affect retention

Introduction

This section will cover the primary factors that were identified in interviews with stakeholders as affecting regional, rural, or remote (RRR) student retention to Year 12. These factors and the associated responses from schools and education bodies were identified through analysis of data gathered in interviews, focus groups, and survey responses.

Primary factors refer to the most prevalent influences that were raised by stakeholders and survey respondents, and which were identified in at least half of all engagements (interviews, focus groups, and surveys). Secondary factors, discussed in Appendix 1, refer to influences that were mentioned multiple times across stakeholder interviews and survey responses, though with less prevalence than the primary factors, and in less than half of engagements overall.

No factor was identified in all responses, which indicates that, although primary factors were common, differing cultural, social, economic, and environmental contexts will result in different priorities and concerns.

Factors are depicted here by their prevalence.

Figure 2: Primary factors affecting RRR student retention in order of prevalence.
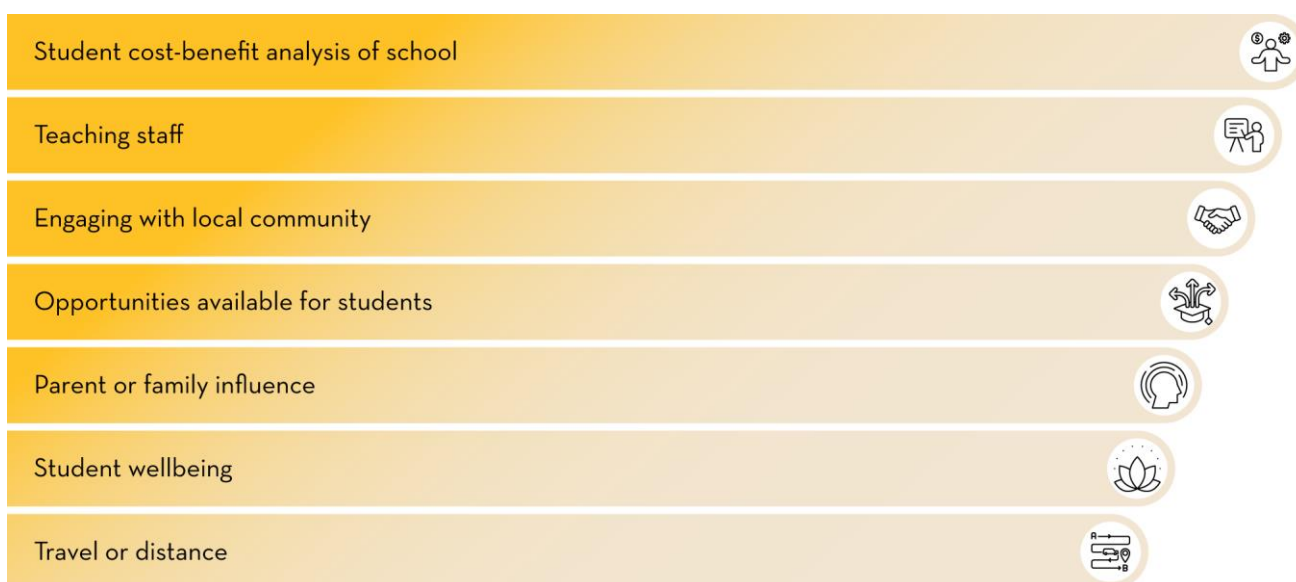
Of particular note, the most commonly discussed factor affecting RRR student retention is the student's cost-benefit analysis of schooling. This is the cost-benefit analysis a student makes based on how they have experienced learning and the overall school environment, and will impact their engagement with school and retention to Year 12. A student's cost-benefit analysis of schooling was seen to be affected by competing priorities, confidence, a student's relationship with their teacher, and the value they placed on education.

This was followed by factors relating to teaching staff. These factors typically involved staff availability, quality, and retention. Barriers relating to teaching staff included staffing shortages, impacted teaching quality because of teaching out of field, and staff turnover. Associated strategies to manage these barriers included greater support for staff social and emotional wellbeing, incentives for staff to relocate to RRR areas, and increasing access and opportunity for professional development.

In addition to identifying factors that affect student retention, stakeholders were asked to share what strategies and approaches RRR schools are using to mitigate these factors. These have been identified below where

relevant. Given that many of the factors impacting retention are linked, some strategies may be identified multiple times, such as those relating to student wellbeing support.

Student cost-benefit analysis of schooling

The most commonly raised factor that impacted retention was a student's personal views on whether school was a worthwhile investment of their time. It was noted that RRR students would make a cost-benefit analysis regarding their experience with learning and the overall school environment, and that this affected their engagement with school and subsequently their retention to Year 12. Though this might contain financial considerations, stakeholders revealed that a student's cost-benefit analysis predominantly refers to how a student evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of attending school, and their perception of the value of continuing education through to Year 12 completion. Student views were seen to be affected by:

- competing priorities
- confidence
- a student's relationship with their teacher
- the value placed on education.

Figure 3: Factors affecting RRR students' cost-benefit analysis of schooling
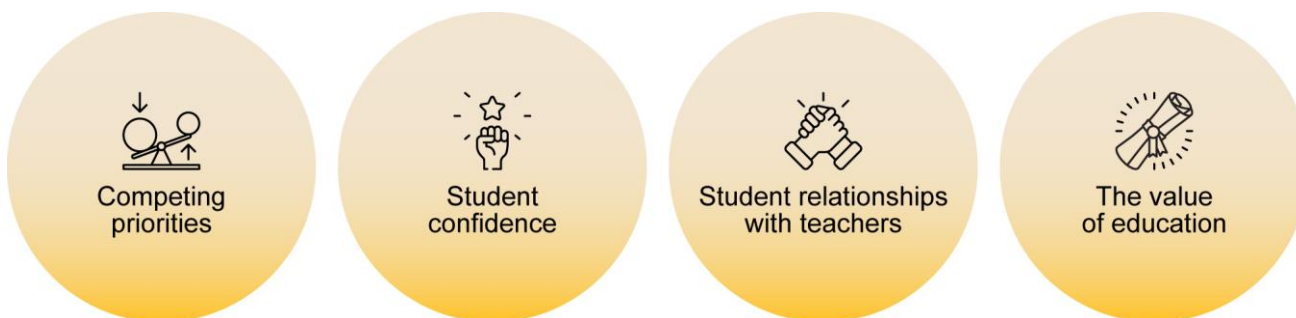
Competing priorities

A student's cost-benefit analysis of schooling was often affected by factors external to the school environment that seemed more attractive than completing Year 12. The most prevalent alternative to schooling mentioned was working. Stakeholders believed that this was exacerbated by a lack of engagement with the school environment or an overall struggle with academic learning, which for students who already had work or a source of income, increased their desire to continue working.

Additionally, stakeholders noted that familial responsibilities added to the belief that working was a more valuable use of a student's time and effort. This was particularly in cases where students needed to look after younger siblings if the parents had to go somewhere, if a student had children of their own, or if the family was struggling financially. In these cases, familial responsibilities impacted student attendance and subsequent retention.

> "Sometimes, they're even sent off to work because they need to provide an income instead of attending school."

Some stakeholders also noted that it was difficult for RRR students to prioritise schooling if their parents or guardians had a negative experience with schooling or did not complete high school themselves.

Cultural priorities were also raised as impacting student attendance. Cultural priorities mentioned ranged from practices such as Sorry Business, to family movement. Stakeholders who worked in boarding noted that separation from culture, land, and community for some First Nations students led to them wanting to leave the boarding environment, which further contributed to disengagement from school.

Strategies and approaches being used by schools to address competing priorities

Stakeholders identified that the appeal of work, and its impact on RRR students' cost-benefit analysis of schooling, was especially hard to address. Stakeholders noted that schools would provide financial support to student's families to try and lower the need for students to work to support their families. This was especially evident in areas where families would be going through financial hardship due to external factors, such as drought patterns.

> "Just because it hasn't rained for ten years, you don't want to lose that critical member of your community. So, they work really closely with families to support them financially." Secondary stakeholder

Some schools chose to engage with a mixed-engagement approach, where students who wanted to leave to work would be offered schooling for one day a week. This allowed them to have some connection to the school community, so that if their employment ended, they would not be entirely disengaged and out of view of the school. To ease the familial priorities of young parents, some principals bought prams and other resources to try and keep young mothers in school, which had some success.

Stakeholders raised the importance of recognising and affirming culture for First Nations students, to help the school develop a culturally safe and respectful culture. Because of this, where cultural priorities superseded school as a priority, schools did not employ strategies or approaches to adjust this, believing that student participation in cultural practices was beneficial to retention in the long run.

Student confidence

Stakeholders identified that when RRR students face barriers to building their sense of confidence in the school environment, they are more likely to disengage with schooling. This could initially impact their attendance rates, before impacting their overall retention and likelihood of viewing Year 12 completion as the best pathway for them. In this regard, a student's cost-benefit analysis is impacted by their confidence within the school environment.

Though not an exhaustive list of factors, stakeholders noted that confidence could be affected by a student's academic capability as well as their exposure to bullying or prejudice. While not unique to RRR areas, it may be harder to build student confidence in RRR areas due to barriers to accessing academic and wellbeing support, such as larger distances to travel for accessing tutoring, or a lack of available counselling services.

Academic confidence

Academic capability from earlier schooling was seen as a large factor to building student confidence. Stakeholders believed that insufficient knowledge from primary school years made learning in high school significantly more difficult for these students. Students would first need to catch up on key academic skills, such as literacy or numeracy, before being able to engage with curriculum content. However, because they were spending time bridging their knowledge gaps, students were then more prone to falling behind in current classwork. Stakeholders felt that this created additional pressure for students, while also lowering their capacity to attain academic achievements at the same level as their peers, impacting their confidence and their view of whether school was a valuable investment of their time and effort.

> "I think a lot of the reasons why kids disengage is they lose confidence. They're not achieving, they don't feel smart, they don't see the reason for ongoing education." Secondary stakeholder

> "When we don't support students at an early education from way back to pre-Grade 3, if students fall behind and don't have a love for learning or an interest in school, trying to keep them engaged through high school becomes very difficult." School staff

> "The behaviours that are required to attend and participate, to go into a classroom, if you're struggling academically, and then you feel bad about yourself, low self-esteem, those sorts of things make it hard for kids to stay." Secondary stakeholder

For First Nations students, there are additional cultural and linguistic barriers that can impact confidence. Many First Nations students are polylingual and know English as a fourth or fifth language. However, in some schools, curriculum was only available to be delivered in English. This language barrier could impact the capacity for First Nations students' academic success, which stakeholders noted could lead to similar feelings around confidence and the worthwhileness of schooling.

Bullying and prejudice

Student confidence could also be impacted through exposure to bullying. Whether alone or compounded with feelings of not succeeding in the education system, this could lead to disengagement with the school environment and viewing school as a cost rather than a benefit. While any student could be affected by bullying, stakeholders who discussed bullying tended to speak about how bullying related to prejudice. Two key areas were raised, those being racism towards First Nations students and prejudice towards students with disability.

First Nations students may have an increased likelihood of disengagement due to racism. Experience with racism could create the feeling that the school is not a safe place for the student, or that the education environment is not designed to support First Nations people.

> "The reality of that for those young people, when they're starting to be bullied and they're being belittled at school, well, then they're going to go. They're going to run back to communities because that's their safe space." Secondary stakeholder

> "When we talk to the kids about why they drop out, often the reason is that their peer groups dropped out, that they feel that the school is for white fellas, not the Aboriginal people." Secondary stakeholder

The likelihood of racism amongst students was noted to be influenced by external factors, such as modern political discourse.

> "Our Aboriginal kids and students are being bullied by other non-Indigenous kids because of the outcome of the Voice." School staff

School staff who worked with students with disability noted that for those students, when in a mainstream school environment, the belief that they would be pre-defined by their disability would impact their confidence and could contribute to disengagement. These staff noted that this could be present even when a school has support systems in place for students with a disability, as it was the perceived perception others had of the student that impacted their confidence and self-esteem.

"They don't want to engage in the school, because even though we have those outreach classes, they're in a mainstream setting. They don't want to be identified as having a disability and being pigeonholed in that." School staff

Strategies and approaches being used by schools to address student confidence

Schools in RRR communities are employing a range of methods to address student confidence across both academic and wellbeing measures.

At a general level, to increase engagement with school and to address academic confidence, some schools introduced a vertical curriculum structure for students up to Year 10. A vertical curriculum structure was described as where students took classes based on their capability in the subject, rather than taking subjects based on their age and year level. For example, if a Year 10 student was passionate and excelling in Maths, they were given the opportunity to take Year 11 Maths. Their other classes, however, would be at Year 10 level, or whichever level was most appropriate for them, even if it was lower than Year 10. This non-traditional method of grouping students allowed students to progress faster in the subjects that they were passionate about, while not being pushed out of their depth in the areas that they needed more support in.

Other methods to build academic confidence included study sessions for students that would typically be held out of normal school hours. Mentoring was seen as a key method to facilitating these sessions, as more individualised support would enable students to manage their workload more effectively, reducing overall stress and increasing their self-confidence on their capability to operate in a school environment.

"Keeping them on track, monitoring where they're at in terms of work completion, that's a really important strategy. Those sorts of things keep you up to speed and make you feel comfortable and supported." Secondary stakeholder

In order to support academic confidence for First Nations students who spoke multiple other languages, some schools introduced a parallel curriculum structure, where the entirety of their curriculum was taught in language. Other schools would bring in an interpreter to provide support, where their funding allowed for it.

"Every subject that we teach is taught parallel to Indigenous Knowledges lens and tries to incorporate as much local content as possible. And that applies to the middle years and senior years, as well." School staff

Schools were noted to typically handle bullying through a twofold approach of individual support and whole-of-school measures. Individual support tended to involve counselling for victims, which could be provided either internally or externally. Where a school did not have the capacity for either option, counselling support for bullying victims tended to be the responsibility of teaching staff. Stakeholders expressed that in RRR communities with limited access to psychological support services, teachers would take on the additional workload and mental burden of trying to provide holistic social and emotional wellbeing care for their students.

Whole-of-school measures would include bullying prevention programs or attempts to adjust the mindset of the student body. For example, some schools would encourage victims to speak to teaching staff about experiences with bullying. Staff mentioned that their efforts involved reassuring victims that no action will be taken without their permission first and staff felt the results were overall positive.

"Historically, when they've told someone then someone would do something about it, and it would make the situation worse. So, what I've been telling students is come in, tell me, I'll give you the

actions that I can take, and then I'll let you decide what to do. Just to give them the confidence." School staff

"There's lots of schools that have got the positive school's approach and being able to reward the positive behaviours and build that culture of supporting each other." School staff

Other examples to build student confidence included rewarding positive behaviours to foster a culture of mutual support, which was noted as being an increasingly common practice among schools, and establishing a student council to give students a genuine voice in school improvement. Stakeholders noted that developing a student council also fostered a sense of connection to the school environment, particularly through middle secondary years.

"It is important that students have a voice in our school. Students work with a leadership mentor, they work on various activities / projects to engage other students from all year groups." Survey response

In terms of addressing racism, some schools receive support from third-party organisations. This was noted to be in the form of leadership and staff team training, so that the issue could be addressed in the long-term with a whole-of-school angle. Additionally, racism was also addressed through changes to the school environment.

One such change is the development of safe spaces. These were seen as valuable to provide First Nations students with a place specifically designed for them that also indicated school support for their identity. Incorporating First Nations knowledge into school curriculum was also recognised as having a similar impact of promoting cultural safety and recognition for First Nations students.

"The first thing you need to do is you need to create an environment in the school, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids feel safe, they feel wanted, they feel like they can turn up every day and just feel comfortable in the school environment." Secondary stakeholder

"That is for our Aboriginal learners to feel culturally safe when they're at school. So, that can support Year 12 attainment if they feel that they're valued and that education is being delivered with culture sensitivity." Education authority

Role models for First Nations students were also noted as particularly important for building the confidence of First Nations students, with one school identifying that a significantly positive approach was to have two co-principals, where one is First Nations, instead of the traditional single-principal approach.

In addition to mentorship, cultural celebration was identified as a key approach to building the confidence and self-esteem of First Nations students within the school environment. Cultural celebration involves engaging with community, either through taking students onto Country or by creating space within the school for First Nations community members to bring knowledge to the school environment. Though community engagement was often an initiative taken by the school, there were instances where third-party First Nations organisations were brought in to assist with facilitating this.

"We'll invite those traditional owners in and they'll run programmes. The aunties will come in and they'll do art programmes or some weaving, and the uncles will come in and they'll do ribbon making, or they'll take the kids out on Country hunting and stuff like that." Secondary stakeholder

Student relationships with teachers

A student's relationship with their teacher was noted to have a significant impact on their cost-benefit analysis of schooling. When reflecting on their school experiences, RRR student participants expressed a clear

preference for subjects where teachers had developed stronger relationships with the student, such as through one-on-one support. Additionally, the interviewees felt that the extent to which a teacher was able to engage with them affected both their perception and enjoyment of the subject.

> "Maths is my least favourite. The kids aren't that great and the teacher doesn't really do much." Current student

> "Well, I've had them all year round, so I get to get to know them, and then I know how they teach, so it's easier to understand." Current student

The importance of a good student-teacher relationship was also raised in interviews with non-student stakeholders, who linked students feeling comfortable in the classroom environment with teachers who develop good relationships with their students being able to provide holistic support. Developing good student-teacher relationships can also help to bridge any perceptions that students might hold about teachers being authoritative figures rather than avenues to provide support. Overall, positive student-teacher relationships were associated with students viewing school as a benefit rather than a cost.

> "If students have had good experiences with teachers in the past, they often look forward to having them in the senior years, and build really good relationships with them, and often is why they want to stay in school or specific classes."

Strategies and approaches being used by schools to build good student-teacher relationships

Methods for building positive student-teacher relationships varied significantly between schools. Some schools introduced a homeroom mentor whose purpose was focused on working with their student every day of the week to build their goals for learning, socialising, and pathways. A student's mentor was consistent for their entire high school experience. By having a role dedicated to fostering a student-teacher relationship, these schools found that even where students were not fully engaged, students felt that there was at least an avenue of support that considered their individual contexts.

> "This person knows them intimately, knows their family really well, and there's a strong connection between student, teacher, school and home." School staff

Other schools went through third-party organisations. This was noted to be beneficial because students were more likely to view external adults as friends. Because these external parties could develop strong relationships with students, and were also liaising with teachers, they were uniquely positioned to break down pre-existing barriers to good student-teacher relationships.

The value of education

Stakeholders identified that RRR students who could see some sort of personal value of education were more likely to stay in school and were generally more receptive to retention strategies and approaches. Stakeholders noted that when students saw the value in education, they were more likely to view school as a benefit rather than a cost.

> "So, if you make it relevant and connect them to the real world, then you're likely to retain them. If kids know that what they're doing is meaningful, they'll stay." Secondary stakeholder

Strategies and approaches being used by schools to impart the value of education to RRR students

Current strategies to show the value of education often involved modifying curriculum content so that it was directly relevant to students, either through connection to their location, community, or personal interests. Schools would introduce innovative ways to merge curriculum content with practical applications to demonstrate the value of the learning. For example, one school took students to catch fish which they then used for dissection and to discuss species. Other teachers collected natural samples from the surrounding environment, such as tree bark or kangaroo poo, to show how chemical bonds can be manipulated into making glue. Some activities involved cultural and environmental preservation, such as cleaning out water holes and testing the pH levels of the water to determine if it was drinkable. Activities that were seasonally dependent, such as food harvesting or controlled burnings, were also raised.

> "So, they used the fishing method, but they also used a science lesson in there, as well, and that gets exciting for the kids when they see the relevance with it." Secondary stakeholder

Some schools noted that they would get students to solve a problem that their local community would be facing, based on student interests and passions, such as drug and alcohol use or homelessness. This was to develop problem solving skills and to come up with solutions against a real-world backdrop, so that they would develop an interest in education. These practical applications of the curriculum could be both internally provided or achieved through partnering with a third-party education program provider.

> "You dig into their passion, and you give them the room to solve problems, to come up with solutions for those problems. Then you see young people flourish, then you see them take an interest in education." Secondary stakeholder

A third strategy that schools used was to bring education to parents and the community, and challenging negative perceptions of the value of education. Where funding allowed for it, some schools would run adult education classes to improve the literacy and numeracy skills for parents of enrolled students.

> "The predominant one, I've mentioned this already, is educating students, parents and the community on the importance of a Year 12 education." Education authority

Teaching staff

Several factors relating to RRR teaching staff were identified. These primarily revolved around the availability of staff, the quality of education that they could provide, and the ability to retain staff for multiple years. While these have been presented here as discrete categories, the three are closely linked.

Figure 4: Factors relating to teaching staff affecting RRR student retention

Teaching staff availability

Teaching staff quality

Teaching staff retention

Teaching staff availability

Stakeholders raised that the inability to source and hire staff for classes was a significant barrier to student retention. Overall beliefs were that the shortage of teachers in RRR schools meant that the opportunities that could be provided by a school were also decreased, which could impact both a student's choice to stay at the school and their engagement with learning. Stakeholders particularly identified the inability to hire specialised staff as a barrier to retention efforts. In these cases, specialised staff could either be specialist subject teachers, or non-teaching support staff such as a psychologist or speech therapist.

> "It's got a hell of a lot worse in the last three years, just due to teacher shortages." Education authority

> "If it's hard to staff school, it's almost impossible to have a positive influence on student retention." Secondary stakeholder

> "We advertised for two years and could not get a chemistry teacher and we had students that wanted to do chemistry and so they left and went to other schools." School staff

Stakeholders raised that the lack of available specialist staff could lead to a negative self-fulfilling cycle, where the inability for a school to hire a specialist teacher for a particular subject offering would cause students to leave school (either to move to a different school or to disengage from the learning environment entirely). With a decrease in student numbers and therefore class size, the funding for the school would also decrease, which meant the school would be less able to hire a specialist teacher to prevent those students from leaving the school environment.

> "If suddenly physics only has three students, you can't run that course anymore because you just can't afford to have a teacher working for just four kids. So, then again, because you can't run the course, the kids leave and because the kids leave, you can't run the course." Education authority

Strategies and approaches being used by schools to address teaching staff availability

Schools noted that the current nationwide teacher shortage meant that there were limited opportunities to implement strategies that would address teaching staff availability. However, broadly, they mentioned the need to provide financial incentives for potential staff to move out of metropolitan areas and into RRR areas. Additionally, stakeholders raised that there needs to be a clearer understanding and expectation of what life can be like in RRR locations. In some cases, government support in subsidising incentives was noted as being particularly beneficial. However, some stakeholders raised that experienced teachers might have a more difficult time in moving from a major city to a RRR location due to external ties they might have to the city, such as housing.

> "At a government level, the Northern Territory has some very good incentives, financially, for people to come, which is what usually attracts them. You don't have to pay rent, you don't have to pay electricity or water, you get some allowances that cover the excesses on food and freight. You get three trips out, paid for, per year to the nearest capital." School staff

> "There's probably a financial disincentive for people to leave the city, if they're older, to go and work in a regional and remote location. First of all, you've got to think about what your family needs are, but you're not going to sell your house and let that real estate go and go into a regional and remote community." Secondary stakeholder

Teaching staff quality

Teaching staff quality was an important consideration for stakeholders when it came to student retention. Most commonly, stakeholders raised that RRR teaching staff would often need to teach outside of the field they studied in. Alternatively, stakeholders expressed concerns that new RRR teachers were being given high levels of responsibility that would typically be expected from teachers with more experience. This included teaching higher year level classes as well as being tasked with leadership duties or complex administrative burdens.

Stakeholders identified that national staff shortages was the cause for teachers needing to teach outside of their field and having high levels of responsibilities without the appropriate experience.

When it came to discussing teaching out of field in RRR schools, the main concern raised by stakeholders was that teachers would not have the relevant expertise that would be required to teach a Year 12 specialist subject. An additional concern was that teachers teaching out of field might not be able to pass on a passion for that subject to the students. For example, a physics teacher who was tasked with teaching biology might not be able to foster the adequate amount of inquiry, passion, or desire to learn compared to if they were teaching a physics class.

> "We had first year out teaching graduates teaching Year 12 subjects. I would query that. I think you need expert experienced teachers in Year 12." Secondary stakeholder

> "Teachers may often be teaching out of field or not experts in their subjects and may not be able to get across the passion." Secondary stakeholder

Teaching staff quality was also noted to be impacted by teachers needing to provide holistic support for students, including social and emotional wellbeing support, which would detract from their time to prepare for classes or support other students academically.

Additionally, some stakeholders felt that the new teaching staff were not adequately prepared, either professionally or personally, for the RRR environment.

> "A lot of people make the decision without much information about the area that they're going to, and then leave because it's not what they expected. So, it would be better if people go in with understanding what the context is, what the strengths of it are and what the challenges are." Secondary stakeholder

Stakeholders also held concerns about the ability of metropolitan-trained staff to deliver culturally safe and responsive teaching. An additional concern was that the workload of teaching staff limited their ability to receive cultural training, or other forms of professional development, that would improve their teaching quality. Sometimes, stakeholders noted, staff were unable to receive professional development because of the inability to find a substitute teacher to cover their classes for the duration of the training.

> "They might not have the cultural awareness, they might not have cultural training and so they might struggle, depending how much support or mentoring or induction they get at the school." Education authority

> "Not enough relief teachers to be able to enable the teachers to do professional learning." Secondary stakeholder

> "It's very costly to send consultants out to the regions. So, then you'll have staff being sent down to the city to do a training course. Then you've got the cost of teacher relief. You can't backfill those teachers in your school because there are no relief teachers." Education authority

Teaching quality was also noted to be impacted by a teacher's ability to form relationships with both the student and the wider community. The primary barrier to this was staff turnover, discussed below in Teaching staff retention.

Strategies and approaches being used by schools to address teaching staff quality

Generally, strategies that would improve teacher retention would also work to improve the quality of the teachers at the school, as it would allow teaching staff to develop their skills and their relationships with students and the community so that they could better deliver course content in a way that was engaging for students.

Specific strategies for targeting teaching quality were predominantly those that removed barriers for RRR teachers to access professional development or other forms of training. These strategies included flying professional development trainers into the school location, sharing resources with neighbouring schools, and utilising online learning options to allow teachers to access professional development.

> "If you're flying someone up for professional development, if you're doing something with the other high school, then you've got all their teachers as well as our teachers, so you can share the costs of flying someone up and both get the benefit." School staff

> "We offer online professional learning in just targeted areas that schools talk about looking to want to access, and that sort of thing." Secondary stakeholder

Schools would also increase teaching quality through engaging with First Nations organisations to build cultural competency of staff. Stakeholders who worked with teachers noted that they would typically be brought in when new teachers were hired, in order to ensure that all staff were teaching in a culturally aware and safe manner.

> "Mentoring with the staff, a lot of them haven't quite worked with many Aboriginal people, so we give them professional development with some cultural embedding, so they can understand a little bit more about cultural values and those type of things." Secondary stakeholder

Certain state government initiatives also help facilitate professional development access to improve teaching quality. Stakeholders particularly noted the Northern Territory's study leave points, which provides teachers with a set amount of paid "study leave" after three or four years of working in RRR areas. This program was noted to have a positive impact, as it allowed teachers to upskill in the areas that they were most passionate about, for example teaching English as a second language.

Teaching staff retention

Stakeholders held strong views on teacher retention and staff turnover in RRR schools, believing it to be one of the most crucial target areas to address in order to improve student retention to Year 12 and increase student engagement with the schooling environment. Staff turnover was particularly noteworthy primarily because of the gaps it left in terms of teaching staff available at a school, and the lost teacher-student and teacher-community relationships that were seen as integral to fostering a safe, inquisitive, and positive

learning environment. Staff turnover was typically linked to new university graduates viewing RRR schooling as a means to gain in-field experience that would allow them to move to a metropolitan school.

Mental wellbeing of teaching staff was equally raised as a factor in high staff turnover rates in RRR schools. Mental wellbeing was also important for school principals, who could often be working additional hours in a teaching capacity. This means that for some principals, they work teaching classes through normal school hours and then do principal duties out of school hours, which stakeholders noted could run the risk of increased burnout. Leadership turnover rates were noted as negatively impacting staff retention rates, and also student retention rates as strategies and approaches could easily be modified or removed based on the new principal's beliefs on how the school should operate, potentially meaning that student and staff retention efforts were not being implemented for enough time to have a significant impact.

> "If you don't have the stability within your staff and you don't have consistency within your staff, well, that's going to, one, affect your students' engagement, but it's also going to affect appreciation for school, possibly, as well." School staff

> "Schools that I've seen increasing retention have had consistent leadership … they have developed programmes where they're retaining staff, so there's quite a lot of work done on staff retention." Education authority

Stakeholders noted that a unique challenge for schools to overcome was establishing a good work-life balance for school staff. This is typically because staff would be working additional hours to prepare lessons, as their normal working hours would often be spent supporting students with physical, social and emotional wellbeing. Additionally, stakeholders acknowledged that in smaller towns, feelings of loneliness may be heightened where there are fewer recreational options. In some cases, students being 18 years old could also pose a problem for work-life balance, as staff could run into students in places such as local pubs or alcohol licensed venues, which further removed the separation between the school environment and a teacher's personal life.

Strategies and approaches being used by schools to address teaching staff retention

Stakeholders mentioned that teacher retention was strongly linked to the overall wellbeing of staff. Staff wellbeing incorporated social and emotional wellbeing, opportunities for career progression, and ensuring a work-life balance within the potential constraints of the RRR setting. Strategies and approaches to improve teacher retention primarily fell into these categories. Effective strategies and approaches for improving teaching retention also benefited the overall teaching quality at a school, as staff were better positioned within the school (and broader) community and typically would have better teacher-student relationships, which allowed them to tailor and impart curriculum content more effectively.

> "If staff aren't happy, they see it as a two-year position, and they want to go back, but if they're happy, they fall in love with the town, then yes, they'll stay on." School staff

Schools that put a heavy focus on improving the social and emotional wellbeing of their staff noted that they not only saw greater staff retention, but also an easier time with attracting new teachers (despite overall difficulties with staff availability). Stakeholders from schools where staff wellbeing was a strategic goal additionally found that both their student retention and new student interest increased. Staff wellbeing at these schools was fostered through acknowledging that staff in RRR areas may be at greater risk of loneliness or feeling stagnated. Wellbeing approaches included providing counselling for school staff, automatically approving any leave, allowances for paid time off for professional development, and government-level strategies such as covering HECS debts or housing. At a broader level, stakeholders recommended creating

a safe and positive working environment for their staff. By focusing on wellbeing approaches that dealt with aspects outside of the school environment, stakeholders noted that a stronger work-life balance for staff was possible.

> "If a teacher asks for leave, I never say no. Because if they want to go to [a city] at any stage for whatever reason it might be, you don't want your staff feeling like they're missing out. So, being really flexible." School staff

> "Teacher training, incentives, our enterprise bargaining agreement, pay conditions being adjusted to support staff going to the regional areas, those types of things. They have to impact at the system level. That's the sort of stuff that can help to support schools in the regions with all the variabilities beyond their control." Education authority

Creating opportunities for staff included both professional development and career growth within a teacher's school, and was noted as beneficial for teaching staff retention. Stakeholders especially noted that creating roles and opportunities for staff to progress their career and develop leadership skills helped to prevent feelings of stagnation, that could lead to staff seeking alternate roles in different schools. In addition, some schools partnered with universities to assist staff in upskilling in areas that were crucial for them to perform their roles better, such as those relating to student social and emotional wellbeing or cultural awareness.

> "If you create stepping-stones and a pathway for a leadership position, or just a career pathway for staff, then they can say, oh, look, there is room for me to grow and progress at this school." School staff

> "One of the things we've undertaken, and this is the first year, we've worked with Notre Dame in partnership, and we offer scholarships to teachers to access a professional certificate in student wellbeing. It's not for psychs, it's not for counsellors, it's for the teacher." School staff

Some stakeholders acknowledged that there is capacity for further government-level strategies that would incentivise teachers moving to regional, rural, and remote areas to remain in those communities long-term.

> "We've got HECS debt being paid, which is a great thing. But more incentives for teachers to be able to stay in the regional area long-term, because often the teachers will come, but they'll only stay for two years or three years." Education authority

It is important to remember that staff retention approaches are subject to an individual school's capacity to finance retention strategies, and that this capacity could be directly impacted by any issues with staff retention currently affecting the school. This could be, for example, a decrease in government funding based on class sizes, which might affect both a school's capacity to have staff, and their capacity to implement strategies that could retain the staff that they have.

Engaging with local community

Though not identified as a factor that negatively impacted student retention, engaging with local community was raised as a method to increase student retention by nearly all interview respondents. Engaging with local community to increase retention was noted to be highly dependent on a school's location and context, and was often linked to a celebration of First Nations identity.

By engaging with the local community through activities like volunteering or partnering with local recreational clubs, stakeholders felt that schools could show the relevancy of the curriculum, increase attendance,

increase their access to physical and mental wellbeing support, build school reputation and change community perceptions of school.

Examples of community engagement include students doing projects based on learning about problems that their community faced, such as homelessness, and considering potential solutions or avenues of support that could be pursued. Stakeholders noted that by taking a community-focused approach to curriculum delivery, students were more likely to see the relevancy of what they were learning and their engagement, and subsequent retention, would increase.

A notable strategy that was raised was an example where a school introduced flexibility with their schooling environment, to increase their attendance rate and to respond to community habits. The school would run classes at the school from 9am until 1pm. Around 1pm, the staff member noted that students would leave to go home for lunch with their families, which resulted in a drop in attendance halfway through the day because students would be disincentivised from coming back to school. To combat this, staff would take trailers out into the community and deliver course content there. By having the flexibility to adapt their class delivery to community behaviour, the school was able to greatly increase their attendance rate. Additionally, because they were teaching in community spaces rather than the school, they were able to provide education to some of the parents of students as well.

> "Half the teachers took trailers out into the camps, and worked school in the camps, while the other half of the teachers had been on contact time, and then vice versa, two afternoons. Our attendance went through the roof." School staff

Stakeholders also identified that engaging with external organisations in the community, such as regional university study hubs, TAFE, or allied health services, was often integral to being able to provide health and wellbeing services for students. Engaging with regional university study hubs or TAFE, for example, was seen as beneficial as it could enable final-year student practitioners to engage with students and provide healthcare that might have been previously inaccessible due to a lack of specialists or financial cost to families.

> "Students are also involved in community engagement which helps their adaptation to society. Students are involved in volunteer work, work experience programs, school-based traineeships, workplace learning to gain a taste of what an industry area consists of assisting with the decision-making process for future career opportunities." Survey respondent

Stakeholders also raised the importance of engaging with parents, guardians, and in some cases First Nations Elders to identify issues from outside of the school environment that could be affecting a student's retention. This was noted to have a two-fold benefit, in that the school would be better able to understand the needs of a student and make adjustments to support their learning, and it would improve the perception and reputation of the school within the community. Improving community reputation was noted to foster positive views about education, create motivation to continue schooling, and inspire younger students.

> "When the kids' parents who talk the most are the ones who are having issues and if they feel like they're being supported and their kids are being supported, they spread that over within the community." School staff

> "By having students involved in the community / clubs / associations, it creates a collaborative community which is highly regarded but also acknowledged by younger generations. The role on effect of support leads into motivation and drive which in turn rubs off onto other students." Survey respondent

> "Students and staff organise events such as RUOK Day, students are very keen to help and get involved and help encourage others to get involved." Survey respondent

In terms of providing support for community, some schools noted that they would assist families with access to financial support, such as ABSTUDY, or with community-based programs that their students would participate in. However, stakeholders noted that in RRR communities, both third-party and government programs have a risk of low engagement due to the community seeing them as temporary rather than long-term support. To try and bridge this barrier, some schools would act as a coordinating central body for education-based programs to try and increase engagement with them, as the school could be seen by the community as a consistent presence. While this did help with program engagement, this also added additional administrative burden to schools, and stakeholders noted that there is opportunity for greater coordination between not-for-profit and government services and programs.

> "Most community members just go, oh, it's just another programme, they'll be gone within six months. Or there are all these different programmes, which one's worthwhile? There's a need for coordination across those services, not-for-profit and government." Secondary stakeholder

Because RRR schools play a broad role within their communities, sometimes beyond the traditional scope of a school, education or retention programs that intersect with community-level initiatives should aim to reduce additional administrative or operational burdens while still allowing for schools to tailor and adapt programs to suit the needs of their community.

Opportunities available for RRR students

Stakeholders discussed opportunities available for RRR students in two main ways, either as the internal curriculum subjects that the school was able to provide, or the awareness and availability of diverse external post-school pathways.

Subject availability was noted as an especially large factor affecting RRR student retention. Stakeholders related greater subject availability with an increased sense of purpose for students, more interest in schooling and continued learning, and a broader sense of the variety of post-school opportunities available to them.

However, stakeholders noted that there were several significant limitations to providing a wide range of subjects. Firstly, nationwide staff shortages meant that RRR schools would often need to stop offering a particular subject due to an inability to find a suitable teacher. Secondly, with smaller class sizes, school funding could be impacted enough to make certain subjects no longer sustainable to hold. Thirdly, if a school had limited subject offerings, students would be more likely to either pursue alternative pathways or leave the school for a different one that had the subjects that they wanted to learn. Stakeholders specified that in RRR settings, mining companies are able to provide attractive working offerings as early as year 10, and so a school that is unable to provide subjects that speak to a student's interests is less able to compete as a pathway.

> "Often students will vote with their feet if you're not providing the curriculum options that they want, especially at Year 12 level." Education authority

In cases where a student has transferred to a different school that offers subjects related to their interests and desired pathways, although that student is still within an education environment and could be more likely to complete Year 12, there are still some barriers that need to be considered. For example, school funding is often determined on enrolment numbers, and the school who has lost a student may lose funding that allows them to have other subjects, which could in turn lead to a cascade effect of other students leaving. Additionally, the ability for a student to transfer to another school is often based on the capacity of the student to access another school, and for parents to be able to financially support the change.

> "You need a certain number of kids per class to make that class financially viable. If suddenly physics only has three students, you can't run that course anymore because you just can't afford to have a teacher working for just four kids. So, because you can't run the course, the kids leave and because the kids leave, you can't run the course." Education authority

> "I spoke to a boy who just said his pathway is being changed because of what the school can offer. He said, 'I'm dumped moving into Year 12, and two of my five subjects I can't do because the school won't offer them'. So, he's either got to move schools, which is not a possibility, do it online, which the school said he can't do because that's too much to do online, or just don't do them. So, unfortunately, he's just not doing them." Secondary stakeholder

For First Nations students who transfer schools in order to take specific subjects, this can also result a separation from Country and community and poses an additional retention barrier if the school the student transfers to doesn't have appropriate culturally safe measures.

> "If the nearby college isn't meeting the needs of students, then essentially, they need to move interstate, which is two or three flights away and so that's leaving Country, leaving language, leaving community, leaving family. So that's a huge barrier to young people finishing Year 12, if the school nearby isn't meeting the needs of the young people." Education authority

In terms of external or post-school pathways available, stakeholders noted that where students were dissatisfied with the subjects available at a school, they were more likely to pursue available work-related alternatives. Stakeholders felt that because employment alternatives can be more prevalent in RRR areas, in some cases a community view of entering the workforce contributed to the likelihood of students leaving school before Year 12 completion.

> "There's a mindset of entering the workforce too early, and that's complemented by the fact that industries are providing many traineeships and apprenticeships to Year 10 students." School staff

Stakeholders also identified that the more isolated a location was, the more difficult it was to provide opportunities to students that would show them the variety of available post-school options. For example, some stakeholders mentioned difficulty in showcasing the diversity of university options or even possible jobs in fields that might not be present in their community. Stakeholders felt that the challenges in broadening student perspectives negatively impacted a student's aspirations and goals, and as a result impacted their retention.

> "There is less opportunity to go to, let's say, prestigious universities in the first place, and there's also lesser awareness of why maybe a university degree might be for them, if at all." Secondary stakeholder

> "To even get to their station's a vast distance, often another dirt road … then you have to travel inland to get to a station. So, they're all factors in the opportunities for those students to go to an excursion or do something else." Education authority

Strategies and approaches being used by schools to address the opportunities available to RRR students

Stakeholders noted that schools would turn to online learning as the primary method for schools to deliver courses that they could not run themselves. While this was spoken about positively, especially the ability for schools to access subject specialists where in-person specialists are not available, stakeholders also raised some reservations regarding online learning. Predominantly, stakeholders were concerned about the quality of education being provided, stating that the digital space can be a barrier to effectively making learning

engaging for a student. Other reservations were about the accessibility of online learning as an option, as it would require schools to have access to appropriate infrastructure, have the student's subject interest be available and possible to be done online, and for online learning tools to be equitable.

> "Locally they offer Zoom, extra subjects over Zoom, but our youngest child was into music. How can you learn music over a Zoom lesson?" School staff

Some school staff, who had worked in multiple states, raised an opportunity for greater equity through a national online learning platform that could target key foundational areas such as literacy and numeracy and that could be adapted by schools to suit their individual student needs. This opportunity was raised when discussing how, if one state government did not have adequate online materials for a student, then schools in some states were left without alternative government options and potentially limited funding to access third-party online learning.

To increase awareness of what opportunities are available to students, stakeholders noted that schools would often try to hire a career advisor or, where feasible, train a member of teaching staff to fill this role instead. As part of this, some stakeholders raised that schools would try to bring parents or guardians in to have a meeting with the student about future aspirations and potential pathways to achieve this, so that there is potential for student support outside of the school environment. Career advice was raised as being beneficial for setting realistic goals and expectations for students. For example, where students wanted to be professional sportspeople, career advice could help a student realise the benefit of a backup plan, and this would positively impact their retention.

> "They very quickly see that 99% of them aren't going to have a sporting outcome, in terms of being a professional sportsperson. So, 99% of them need to be looking at other career pathways and opportunities." Secondary stakeholder

For First Nations students, having dedicated First Nations staff to support students from a culturally safe and aware perspective was specifically mentioned as beneficial by several stakeholders.

> "We actually had dedicated pathways advisors for Aboriginal students. And they pick them up in Year 9 going through to Year 12. And we've found that has had a very positive impact on retaining our First Nations students." Education authority

Some schools additionally held career days in which representatives for local industries, regional universities, and metropolitan university were brought in to speak with students. One school arranged for this to coincide with Year 10 subject selection, so that their subjects felt more relevant to their interests and future pathways.

Other schools allowed their students to spend a certain number of days per week in the workforce so that they could trial different career paths without the pressures of having to commit to a work pathway. These stakeholders spoke positively about this approach, as should a student decide that their work placement is not the right pathway for them, they have remained connected to the school community and so are more easily re-integrated into the classroom. Additionally, this had the added benefit of creating a sense of supportiveness from the school.

In cases where it was not logistically possible to get representatives or career advisors into the school, some schools would hold a camp where they took a year group into the closest city to show them the diversity of options available.

> "We look at how do we, not only for the uni pathway but also for the practical pathway, how do they get experience? And then making sure that the subjects they're aligned to work over [Year 10 to Year 12]." School staff

> "Everyone gets a chance to get out into the workforce at Year 10 so that they can go out and trial different things." Secondary stakeholder

While some career advice strategies took place over a set period, such as career days or metropolitan camps, stakeholders also raised the benefit of a consistent ongoing approach to career advice and goal tracking. Stakeholders gave examples of where schools saw notable increases in retention when taking a semesterly approach to career advice and goal tracking, involving parents and family in these discussions, and beginning these discussions as early as Year 9 or Year 10.

Parent or family influence

Stakeholders identified several factors relating to parents and family which have an impact on student retention. In particular, the expectations that family placed on education and school completion, socioeconomic factors such as housing or conflict instability, and the family's lack of faith in the capability of the school to deliver on promised opportunities.

Stakeholders noted that a student's expectation of schooling could be shaped by their parent or family views on schooling. This was mentioned to often be a result of their parent's experience of school, education levels, and whether they completed schooling. Stakeholders acknowledged that retention could be impacted if there were no role models in a student's family who have completed schooling, or who see the benefit of completing Year 12. Without these role models, families could create pressure for a student to take alternate pathways such as working for a family or local business. Stakeholders raised that deficit thinking about schooling, such as that the school can't provide adequate education simply because it is in a RRR location, could also influence parent views on schooling that then filter down to the child and affect how worthwhile they think school is.

Additionally, stakeholders identified that students might require additional academic support if their parents do not have the literacy or numeracy skills to help them with coursework outside of school hours.

> "Probably the biggest thing at the moment is mindset, also, family history … there's no desire or family history of completing Year 12." School staff

> "An issue that sometimes gets overlooked is that when you're dealing with schools from that lower parental education, there needs to be stronger mechanisms in place to make sure that those kids are getting what they need." School staff

Socioeconomic factors also played a significant role in student retention according to stakeholders. Although socioeconomic status was noted as being highly context-dependent, several common barriers were identified through interviews. Rising economic pressure meant that many families in RRR areas were struggling to provide basic needs such as food or stable accommodation. Because of this, multiple stakeholders noted that often schools would see students arriving having not had any food or adequate sleep, both of which impacted their ability to engage and develop in the learning environment, and as a result, their retention. In some areas, stakeholders mentioned that community violence could also negatively affect a student's sleep.

> "Sometimes people are living there because that's where they can afford to live. And as cost of living gets harder and harder … it's not an even playing field for a lot of these kids, compared to what's happening in inner city schools where they might have stronger parental support and that parental education." School staff

Some stakeholders noted that parents or family might distrust the school or not believe that it will generate positive outcomes for their child. This was noted to be more common in remote areas where job opportunities within a community might be limited, and especially in locations which have had government departments attempt interventions that are having limited impact on increasing the employability of community members. In these cases, where parents or community might already distrust non-community members, schools might face additional barriers in gaining the support and trust of families due to higher levels of staff turnover (discussed below in Teaching staff retention). For First Nations communities, this could be made worse due to historical injustices, lack of cultural safety in employment initiatives, or perceptions of the school environment as a system that is not designed for First Nations people.

> "They're just going, nobody here is employable, we'll get outside workers. And so, they just keep bringing people in. The kids see this. The communities, Indigenous people, have huge oral memories of everything. And so, that constant loss of trust in being promised opportunities and then seeing them eroded ... the white workforce doesn't see it because they're moving, and changing, and going all the time. But the Indigenous people who've lived there forever, and will live there forever more, are just watching this cycle going, we just don't believe you. We just don't have any faith. That bleeds down into the kids, who ask 'what's school for then?'" School staff

> "We even had to change our mottos. We used to say, ten years ago, school's taking you somewhere, and it will lead you into the workforce. We can't even use those words anymore because they know for a fact that's not going to happen. We've had to pivot to how it strengthens you as a person." School staff

Strategies and approaches being used by schools to address parent or family influence

Because parent or family influences typically take place outside of the school environment, strategies put in place by schools to address the impact of those influences on retention often deal with the effects of the barrier rather than the cause. For example, many stakeholders mentioned that schools would have breakfast clubs to ensure that all students could have food at the beginning of the day or would run reading clubs to practice literacy skills outside of the classroom environment.

Additionally, approaches that target student social and emotional wellbeing, such as making efforts to hire a school counsellor, were also noted to reduce the impacts of negative parent or family influence, as such approaches helped to build a student's resilience. Other approaches for student social and emotional wellbeing are discussed below in "Student wellbeing".

Separately, stakeholders mentioned that in communities that are less trusting of Western systems, making efforts to engage with both community and families was crucial in retention efforts. Stakeholders noted that broadening the target audience of retention strategies to also include parents of students resulted in positive impacts on student retention, likely because parents began to see the benefits that the school could provide and would begin to reinforce the idea that school retention is important. Examples of efforts to engage with family included both a mother's and Father's Day breakfast, wellbeing days, and specific father-son and mother-daughter activities that engage with broader issues such as men's health.

> "We just really honed in on what we do pastorally, as a school, to really build your reputation within the community. And really rebuild your reputation amongst the kids, as well, that they're cared for." School staff

> "Finding different reasons and excuses to bring parents into the school I think is important, and just, then, giving a sense of what the school's about. They go back and they tell their family and friends." School staff

Stakeholders also noted that some schools would provide financial assistance to families who were struggling financially. This could be through providing scholarships or uniforms, or more general financial support.

> "With the scholarships, we were able to retain the numbers going into Year 11 and the data we're getting from our current Year 11s is that they will continue into Year 12." School staff

> "Probably most importantly, what our boarding schools are doing really well is financially supporting those country families. That country boarder is a critical member of the community and so just because it hasn't rained for ten years, you don't want to lose them." School staff

Student wellbeing

Stakeholders acknowledged that student wellbeing is a varied and highly context-dependent factor, with individual experiences ranging in both cause and severity. Student wellbeing as a factor impacting retention covers both social and emotional wellbeing and physical wellbeing.

> "That becomes a greater challenge for students who receive purely online learning. The types of wellbeing support that need to be in place for those students will differ quite significantly I would imagine." Education authority

> "The trauma that some kids go through, whether it's witnessing domestic violence, or witnessing their parents struggle through cost of living, hits kids hard." School staff

> "Poor mental health has skyrocketed over the last five to ten years and that is also much higher in these areas. So, if a student doesn't have good mental health, they are less likely to go to school." Secondary stakeholder

Given how context dependent student wellbeing is, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to wellbeing that could be scaled up for a national approach. However, strategies and approaches that schools have taken will be discussed to provide an image of potential actions that have been implemented and found to be beneficial for RRR student wellbeing and retention.

School approaches and strategies for improving RRR student wellbeing were predominantly focused on increasing access to support services, with stakeholders noting that many schools are relying on teaching staff to provide both social and emotion wellbeing and physical wellbeing support for students. Additionally, stakeholders raised that many students could have undiagnosed issues that are beyond the standard expectations for what a teacher should handle. However, diagnosis may not be feasible for families because of the distance to the nearest specialist, the wait time for an appointment, or the financial burden. To address this, some schools work with external providers in an effort to reduce wait times.

> "The issues that we're finding is kids who have impairment around foetal alcohol syndrome/disorder, ADHD, ASD as well, are significant issues for our young people. They generally tend to be undiagnosed, predominantly undiagnosed and untreated. And even when they are diagnosed, the treatment plans aren't necessarily always followed through." Secondary stakeholder

> "We've also been employing a range of external providers in order to bring down the time that country students can wait for psychology services, which is very important." Education authority

Stakeholders also acknowledged that because wellbeing barriers can severely impact retention, some schools have had to put a greater focus on student wellbeing over academic course delivery. Many stakeholders mentioned that their schools would establish dedicated pastoral care centres or teams in order to have a centralised area that would be open to students, staff, and in some cases families. For these schools, as a focus on pastoral care and wellbeing was implemented, more students felt willing to discuss issues which then better positioned the school to support them effectively. These schools would also engage with external organisations, such as Headspace, to provide mental wellbeing support where a counsellor was unavailable.

Schools that had the financial capability to establish pastoral care centres also tended to want to expand the support services offered to include physical support, predominantly out of a desire to increase access and reduce wait times for students and families. Stakeholders mentioned that in a lot of cases, schools would be covering multiple welfare angles for the community, sometimes because the school was the safest place for children to be if families could not provide that care outside of school hours.

> "We've had to switch a big focus in the last few years from the academic programme into the wellbeing programme because we can't sustain focused learning without doing a lot of work to try and create a workable learning environment." School staff

> "We're looking to have occupational therapists. We are even exploring how to get a GP on-site, and then how do we get our teams to go out to our families, knowing that if we've got 55% disadvantaged families in our school community, it's not actually necessarily easy for them to get to us or their experience of school life themselves, as adults, may not have been positive."

> "We have a pastural care centre that supports students/families in need. Support is done by means of constant communication, financial subsidies to assist those who need uniform and lunch, and a curriculum care team who address and support students who need academic support and encouragement." Survey respondent

Stakeholders also raised that wellbeing support for RRR students needed a holistic, whole-of-school approach and were hesitant to support one-off programs because they felt that such programs were less effective.

Travel or distance

Stakeholders noted that the distance that it would take to travel to school could impact on both staff and student retention. While for staff this added additional burden and contributed to overall reduced work-life balance, students were noted to be affected academically in part because of the exhaustion from having to travel large distances to access schooling. Stakeholders raised that when students had to travel 1.5 hours each way to access schooling, they would often arrive at school tired and as a result would be disengaged from the learning environment. Large travel times and distances could also impact a student's ability to access extracurricular activities or academic support, as some students would need to leave school immediately so that they could reach home by a reasonable hour. Because of this, travel could impact on a school's attempt to provide academic and social opportunities for students, as they would need to be in-built to the daily school

timetable for all students to benefit from them. This lack of opportunity could extend beyond the school environment, for example if a student wanted or needed to access third-party tutoring.

> "We have to really limit our sporting trainings, debating teams, rehearsals, all of those types of things to recess one or recess two which you can imagine is a pretty short amount of time to get students together." School staff

In particularly remote areas, such as in the Northern Territory, weather could often impact a student's ability to travel to school in the first place. For example, during a wet season, roads could be made inaccessible by car. Though some schools would attempt to work around this by chartering flights through ABSTUDY, the cost and time sensitivity of this as an alternative meant that if a student were to miss the flight for any reason, then they would lose the opportunity to access the school for at least a number of weeks, but potentially over a month.

> "If for some reason they miss the flight, whether that's illness or sorry business or the weather's bad or the plane comes at the wrong time, it takes ABSTUDY ten days to rebook the flights, so you're automatically two more weeks of school missed. Then if they miss that flight, it's another two weeks. So, you're a month into a term and some students aren't back yet." School staff

Some stakeholders additionally raised that not all students had access to transport, making them reliant on alternative methods to get to school, such as school-provided bus or transport services.

Strategies and approaches being used by schools to address travel or distance barriers

Schools noted that they would run bus services, sometimes covered financially by government initiatives, to pick up students in the morning and drop them off in the afternoon. This was noted as beneficial, though there were lingering concerns about the sustainability of the cost it takes to run bus services coupled with the large distances and long travel times required for some students to access school. Additionally, stakeholders raised that in some instances school staff would occasionally take on this role by driving their personal vehicle to pick up students where it was necessary.

Particularly in hotter seasons, stakeholders noted that transport options were essential for bridging transport and distance barriers to getting students to school. This was noted as being due to students not always having access to adequate clothing such as shoes, which could lead to students not attending school if the roads had become too hot to walk on and they had no alternative means of getting to school.

Some schools took the approach of supporting students with getting their driver's license when possible. These schools would also explicitly create space for students to have their car at school, so that they would be incentivised to drive to school if they were able to.

> "If they're old enough to have their licence, they can have their car at school. They couldn't use it a lot but it made it so much easier. Because so often they travel such long distances and on public transport that can be quite challenging." Secondary stakeholder

Section 4

Recommendations for scaling up effective strategies and approaches

Introduction

Stakeholders were apprehensive about the prospect of scaling-up specific effective strategies that are currently used in individual RRR locations to be applied at a national level. This was due to a sense that scaling-up nationally would lead towards a blanket 'one-size-fits-all' approach that would struggle to accommodate the unique contexts that schools in RRR areas operate in. This indicates that the perspectives of people working 'on-the-ground' differed from general government perspectives. While governments might perceive a national approach as allowing for greater cohesion, standardisation, cost monitoring, and efficiency of delivery, people more directly working with RRR schools, students, and communities felt that a scaled-up national approach was not attractive from an outcome perspective.

As discussed in Section 2's discussion of "The validity of "best practice" as terminology", stakeholders identified that the concept of "best practice" was not suitable for the topic of student retention and suggested "good practice" or "great practice" as alternatives that also recognised the importance of individual school context and agency. Additionally, stakeholders raised apprehension about the effectiveness of scaling-up specific strategies, stemming from concerns that scaled-up approaches would struggle to consider the unique contexts that schools in RRR areas operate in. Stakeholders also raised that schools would adjust the delivery of programs run by external parties so that they better suit the needs of their school community. Certain approaches to overcome barriers, and some barriers themselves, might also be outside of the direct scope of the Department.

In speaking about these challenges to scaling-up approaches, stakeholders highlighted an on-the-ground desire for adaptable, broad support for schools that maintain the school's agency and recognises them as the best decision makers when it comes to understanding and supporting their students, families, and community. At the same time, they raised that a singular approach or strategy is insufficient for addressing RRR retention rates at a national level, cautioning against a one-size-fits-all mentality.

Considering these points, the proposal for a scaled-up national approach to student retention is to provide a broad, value-driven scaffolding consisting of five key areas that together take a holistic approach to school support for student retention. These areas are:

- student wellbeing
- staff wellbeing
- connection to culture and community
- providing opportunity
- education support.

The scaffolding is designed to work towards empowering and supporting schools to engage with strategies that sit within these five key areas, while maintaining the school's agency and allowing them to tailor retention-focused approaches to suit the needs of their student body, school environment, and community context. The key areas proposed broadly cover the themes raised in Section 3: Primary factors that affect retention. It is important to remember that the key areas, and the primary factors that they speak to, are not discrete categories but rather are intrinsically linked. The strength of the scaffolding lies in its ability to help schools with selecting activities that are relevant to their gaps in retention support, while also being flexible enough to support schools with adapting and implementing the activity delivery for greater effectiveness.

The five key areas are discussed in more detail below, including some examples of strategies or approaches that could fall into each key area. **It must be remembered that no single strategy, approach, or program**

should be scaled up unilaterally, but should instead be open to be adapted by schools as they see most appropriate.

Barriers for scaling-up effective strategies

Factors beyond the scope of the Department of Education

Some approaches that were suggested by participants for improving RRR student retention could potentially fall outside the remit of the Department, for example, increasing access to allied health services or improving road quality. While these strategies might be beyond the jurisdiction of the Department, the fact that they were raised by stakeholders suggests a desire for a more holistic approach to school support that isn't purely focused on educational outcomes.

The lack of a singular solution

Stakeholders held mixed views on scaling-up effective approaches. Apprehension typically stemmed from a belief that scaled-up approaches would struggle to consider the unique contexts that schools in RRR areas operate in. Stakeholders also felt that in scaling up effective strategies, it was important to keep a school's agency to adapt approaches to their own context. This was echoed by stakeholders who mentioned that schools, when partnering with third-party organisations or pre-established programs, would often adjust the delivery of those programs to suit the needs of their student body and school community.

> "My suggestion would be to look at what you could do to amplify those at a national level that make sense at a national level, while still preserving the ability of local education authorities to tailor things to their contexts." Education Authority

> "We need meaningful ways of tackling issues that need to be consistent and appropriately flexible for local contexts." Education Authority

> "Our big push is school has to look different in remote communities, not that picture-perfect cookie-cutter version that we get in mainstream society." School staff

With this in mind, the recommended approach to scaled-up efforts would be to look at broad values and themes that could guide funding decisions based on the individual needs that schools have.

Systemic changes

Some stakeholders expressed a desire for a deeper change of the underlying education system to properly improve RRR student retention. These tended to stem from a belief that the current system of teaching, learning, and assessment was no longer sufficient for an increasingly globalised and technologically focused world, where information can be readily available from the internet. Stakeholders who held these beliefs felt that rather than rote learning, curriculum content should focus more on fostering skills such as critical thinking, innovation, or imagination.

> "Are we training them to be industry workers, which a lot of our schooling is based around? I don't think that's true anymore, we're training them for a different kind of economy. So, we need to shift the underlying system, shaking the role of the teacher within that learning environment." Secondary stakeholder

"If you look even just from 1850 to now, every sector has changed dramatically. Education, if you look at images from a classroom in 1850 compared to now, it's remarkably roughly the same. And that shows that we're obviously not catering to a changing world. I think teachers are not delivering, and of course teachers are overworked, so I'm not placing the blame on the teachers. I think it's the fault of the system that does not allow for innovation, that just is trying to produce this industry standard of training more and more people on the same pipeline. Which doesn't lead to the outcomes we want in an increasingly complex world." Secondary stakeholder

A proposed change to the education system involved a greater focus on equipping RRR students with skills to better prepare them for a changing workforce, or for jobs that might not yet exist, and especially for students with learning disabilities that could impact their retention in a traditional school environment.

"Instead of getting them through like the industrial production line of learning, can we train their capacity to problem solve? Can we train their capacity to adapt to situations? Can we train their imaginative potential? I think if we do all of that, more kids will want to be in schools." Secondary stakeholder

"Recognised courses that will enable students with educational issues gain skills and experience that will benefit them in a career when they leave school." Survey respondent

Some stakeholders felt that systemic changes would help bridge misunderstandings that negatively impacted retention, specifically when RRR schools were expected to operate in a similar way to metropolitan schools. Additionally, some stakeholders raised that traditional assessment methods that would work in metropolitan settings were insufficient in a RRR context, due to how varied the foundational understanding of core subjects such as literacy or numeracy were among students. This led to impressions that the underlying education system, which requires traditional assessment methods, was more about ensuring specific checkpoints were being met than actually assessing student understanding or ability level.

"Because new leadership coming in and a Department who don't care, just want everything to reset back to the default of this is how schools look in the cities." School staff

"We need to be able to design lessons that are more orientated towards the students' ability levels, rather than just getting through content. We're so focused on content and ticking boxes to say we're getting through our curriculum requirements, that we're actually lacking the process and checking for understanding of our students." School staff

"The other thing is, is the assessment entirely appropriate? Can we assess in different ways? Are students maybe disengaging and not liking school because we have report cards that go A to E?" School staff

Overall, stakeholders who felt that systemic changes were required tended to also believe that there was scope for future learnings to inform a more modern system of schooling and education for young people, but that there needed to be a mindset shift to allow for the time to see what alternative methods for learning, schooling, curriculum or assessment could work.

"There needs to be permissions to try really different things, and there needs to be support to deliver those really different things. And the trust that schools can try something that doesn't look like anything you've ever seen before. But why not? Why not experiment, and have that permission to experiment?"

Scaffolding for holistic school support

The proposed scaffolding for scaling-up effective strategies and approaches will take five key areas where support is needed to suggest a more holistic support system for schools. Combined, these five areas will provide a holistic approach to school support.

Figure 5: Key areas for a holistic approach to school support
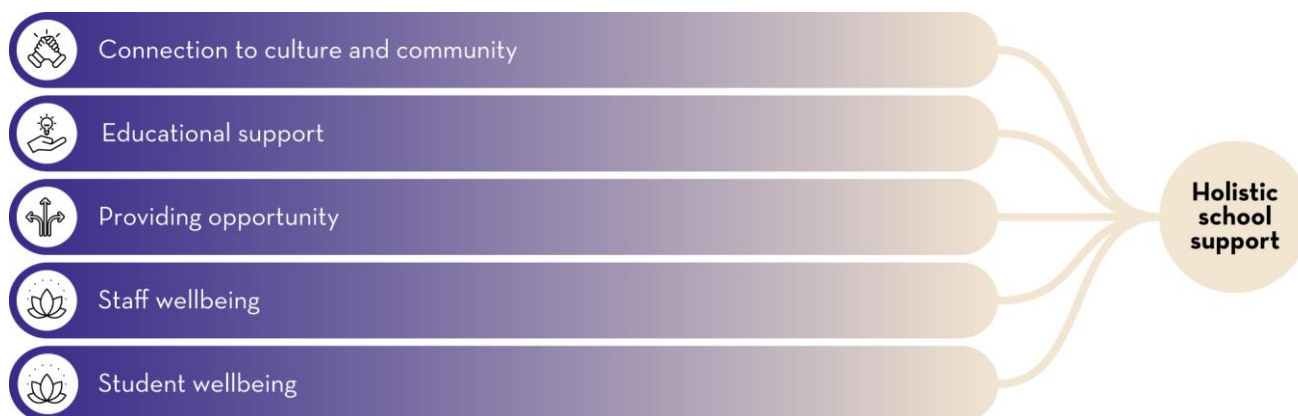
The scaffolding considers the primary factors that affect RRR student retention, as well as the barriers to a national approach previously raised, and recommends that funding agreements should be flexible enough to empower schools to select and tailor programs, strategies or approaches that are most suited to the needs of their student body, school environment, and community context. **No single program, strategy, or approach should be prescriptively or unilaterally scaled up.**

Connection to culture and community

The key area of connection to culture and community refers to a school's First Nations cultural safety and cultural celebration, as well as the ways in which a school engages with the wider community regardless of First Nations identity. This area predominantly speaks to the following primary factors: engaging with local community, student wellbeing, travel or distance, and student cost-benefit analysis of schooling.

Note, schools may choose to engage with strategies, approaches, or programs that do not align with these specific factors, but that still work to improve connection to culture and community.

Stakeholder responses identified that schools aim to develop a connection with culture and community through a range of strategies, approaches, and programs, including but not limited to:

- **Creating an environment of cultural safety and cultural celebration**. For example, through the development of safe spaces for First Nations students, implementing programs that promote inclusivity and cultural diversity such as dancing, music, songs, languages, or celebrating First Nations events.
- **Engaging with local First Nations communities**. For example, connecting with local Elders and community leaders to run programs for increasing cultural heritage and history awareness, having representatives from local First Nations health services run workshops, or providing mentoring from local First Nations not-for-profit organisations.
- **Tailoring curriculum content so that it includes community elements or engagement with community**. For example, looking at social issues the community is facing and ideas on how they could be addressed, or adapting class location to travel to clusters of students to deliver course content.

- **Engaging with local businesses and organisations**, such as regional university study hubs or TAFE to provide more pathway visibility and opportunity for RRR students, or to increase access to healthcare via final-year student practitioners.
- **Providing financial support to families**. For example, assisting with ABSTUDY requirements and applications, or transporting students to and from school.
- **Providing transport options** for students and staff.

Funding decisions for school support that addresses connection to culture and community should consider the value of innovative practices rather than discounting them on the basis of not being presented in the above list. Ultimately, school staff and leadership will be better positioned to identify the benefits of different types of community engagement, and so should be given the agency to tailor and allocate funding based on their understanding of the student body and local community.

Recommendation 3: Create incentives for RRR schools to implement practices or strategies that encourage cultural safety, celebration, and connection, and which are holistically embedded within the school community.

Recommendation 4: Develop guidelines to assist RRR teaching staff with tailoring curriculum content and delivery so that students are better able to see how their education is relevant to their lived experience. For example, engaging with local issues, modifying course content so that it is applicable to the student's experience within their community, or teaching outside of school grounds to increase attendance.

Educational support

The key area of educational support refers to the academic support available to RRR students. This area predominantly speaks to the following primary factors: teaching staff quality, student cost-benefit analysis of schooling, and opportunities available for students.

Note, schools may choose to engage with strategies, approaches, or programs that do not explicitly align with educational support, but that can have a follow-on effect of increasing academic confidence, outcomes and student retention to Year 12.

Stakeholder responses identified that schools aim to provide educational support through a range of strategies, approaches, and programs, including but not limited to:

- **Funding professional development for teaching staff** so that they can effectively deliver curriculum content for students who know English as a second language.
- **Implementation of learning practices that are not seen as "traditional"**. For example, having a vertical curriculum structure, non-traditional assessment methods, or adapting curriculum content to reflect community factors such as environment or social context.
- **Providing study support options**. For example, reading clubs before or after school, providing mentoring and tutoring from third-party organisations, or individualised support for students at risk of disengagement.
- **Providing education to families of students** to shift perceptions of schooling and education.

Funding decisions for school to implement educational support should consider the value of innovative practices rather than evaluating them based on their presence in the above list. Ultimately, school staff and leadership will be better positioned to identify the types of educational support that would best benefit their

student body, and so should be given the agency to tailor and allocate funding based on their understanding of the student body and local community.

Recommendation 5: Build the capacity of new teaching graduates so that they are better equipped to provide a culturally safe learning environment and to deliver curriculum content to culturally and linguistically diverse RRR students.

Recommendation 6: Empower RRR schools to experiment with innovative teaching approaches that better respond to the learning needs of their student body. For example, through implementing vertical curriculum structures, non-traditional assessment methods, or adapting curriculum delivery.

Recommendation 7: Develop programs or content that encourages RRR families to have positive views of schooling, fostering a supportive learning environment in the home. For example, through targeted media advertising.

Providing opportunity

The key area of providing opportunity encompasses the range of opportunities available to RRR students within the school environment, as well as the external, post-school pathways available to them. This area predominantly speaks to the following primary factors: opportunities available for students and a student's cost-benefit analysis of schooling.

Note, schools may choose to engage with strategies, approaches, or programs that do not explicitly align with providing opportunity, but that can have a follow-on effect of increasing student retention by having similar effects on aspirations, goals, and perceived value of education.

Stakeholder responses identified that schools aim to provide students with internal and post-school opportunities through a range of strategies, approaches, and programs, including but not limited to:

- **Providing online learning options**, so that students can access subjects that align to their interests. For example, through school-developed online learning modules or registered distance education providers.
- **Providing career advice**. For example, through having a dedicated career advisor role on the teaching staff team, subsidising costs for guests or role models to come to the school, or by hosting career-focused events with local business and further academic education representatives.
- **Increasing awareness of post-school opportunities**. For example, through trips to metropolitan areas, school excursions, or facilitating work trial periods to integrate workforce experiences with classroom learning.

Funding decisions for school support that addresses the opportunities available for RRR students, both internally and externally, should consider the value of innovative practices rather than evaluating them based on whether or not they are presented in the above list. Ultimately, school staff and leadership will be better positioned to engage with students and families to determine the most effective approaches to broadening the student body mindset about the opportunities they could access, and so should be given the agency to tailor and allocate funding based on their understanding of the student body and local community.

Recommendation 8: Support the capacity of RRR schools to provide online learning options for their students so that they can access subjects aligned with their interests. For example, through improved digital infrastructure, device availability, or making it easier to access online learning courses.

Recommendation 9: Support RRR schools to provide students with greater visibility of their potential career pathways and post-school options. For example, by facilitating active engagement with local universities or TAFE, mentorship or work-based placements, allocating funding for schools to be better equipped to hire career advisors or train staff to fill these roles, or reimbursements for excursions or trips to metropolitan areas.

Staff wellbeing

The key area of staff wellbeing encompasses the social and emotional wellbeing of staff, professional development opportunities, staff retention, and staff availability. This area predominantly speaks to the following primary factors: teaching staff availability, quality, and retention.

Note, schools may choose to engage with strategies, approaches, or programs that do not explicitly align with staff wellbeing, but that can have a follow-on effect of increasing staff wellbeing, retention, quality, or availability.

Stakeholder responses identified that schools aim to foster staff wellbeing through a range of strategies, approaches, and programs, including but not limited to:

- **Social and emotional wellbeing support**, such as implementing comprehensive programs that prioritise the social and emotional wellbeing of staff. For example, subsidising counselling services or wellbeing workshops.

- **Financial incentives to encourage staff to move to a RRR school**. For example, additional bonuses, housing or utilities support, or other remuneration that can reduce the cost-of-living burden on staff and make working in non-metropolitan areas more appealing for prospective staff.

- **Removing barriers to professional development or further learning opportunities**. For example, flying in professional development trainers, allowing for paid time off for staff to access professional development, ensuring that the school has capacity for online professional development, or additional funding to assist with hiring substitute teachers to cover classes.

- **Providing regular cultural competency training**. For example, engaging with local First Nations traditional land owners, elders, or not-for-profit organisations, or funding to create safe spaces for First Nations staff.

- **Ensuring funding can support avenues for career growth within the school**, such as allowing for promotion to leadership positions within the staff hierarchy. For example, funding could go towards mentorship programs, leadership training, or subsidising costs for the renewal or addition of relevant qualifications.

- **Creating avenues for improved work-life balance**, such as those that acknowledge and respect the importance of maintaining a healthy balance between professional and personal life, especially in the context of the RRR environment. For example, subsidising flights to metropolitan cities or regional hubs.

Funding decisions for school support that addresses staff wellbeing should consider the value of innovative practices rather than discounting them on the basis of not being presented in the above list. Ultimately, school staff and leadership, such as principals or a school board, are better positioned to identify staff wellbeing

needs, and so should be given the agency to tailor and allocate funding based on their understanding of their school staff and community factors that could impact staff wellbeing and retention.

Recommendation 10: Encourage and empower RRR schools to implement programs that prioritise the social, emotional, and physical wellbeing of school staff, for example those that improve work-life balance or by strengthening initiatives that support the mental health of RRR staff.

Recommendation 11: Create incentives for staff to relocate to RRR areas long-term, such as through assisting with housing, utilities, or other remuneration for cost-of-living expenses.

Recommendation 12: Encourage and support RRR schools with providing professional development programs, including cultural competency, mentorship, or leadership training.

Student wellbeing

The key area of student wellbeing comprises both the social and emotional dimensions of wellbeing as well as physical health. This area predominantly speaks to the following primary factors: parent or family influence, student cost-benefit analysis of schooling, and student wellbeing.

Note, schools may choose to engage with strategies, approaches, or programs that do not align with these specific factors, but that still work to improve student wellbeing and overcome any barriers to retention that might be related to it.

It is highly important that approaches to improving student wellbeing are easy to be adapted and implemented by RRR schools. Because of how unique RRR school contexts are, strategies that can be adopted by a school will be incredibly dependent on the school's ability to access resources and how isolated the school is. For example, funding for extracurricular activities may not be appropriate if many students live far away from the school and cannot afford to spend extra time on school grounds, and focusing efforts on hiring nurses or school counsellors may not be feasible if there are significant barriers or workforce shortages in a RRR community.

Stakeholder responses identified that schools aim to foster student wellbeing through a range of strategies, approaches, and programs, including but not limited to:

- **Wellbeing support**, such as establishing support systems within the school environment to address students' social and emotional needs. For example, the implementation of a centralised mental support hub or wellbeing days.

- **Physical health extracurricular activities**, such as after-school sports and other physical activities to promote students' physical health and well-rounded development.

- **Online counselling**, such as measures that seek to provide accessible online counselling services.

- **Access to healthcare,** such as facilitating student and family access to allied health services. For example, hiring a school nurse or providing financial support for parents who need to access medical specialists for the diagnostic assessment of their child.

- **Teacher professional development**, for example professional development that focuses on equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to provide trauma-informed support for students, or programs that help empower teachers to create a safe and supportive learning environment that acknowledges and addresses the diverse wellbeing needs of students.

Funding decisions for school support that addresses student wellbeing should consider the value of innovative practices rather than discounting them on the basis of not being presented in the above list. Ultimately, school staff who have strong, ongoing relationships with students will be better positioned to identify the wellbeing needs of a student, and so should be given the agency to tailor and allocate funding based on their understanding of the student body and local community.

Recommendation 13: Empower and assist RRR schools to address student social, emotional, and physical wellbeing needs, such as by having a central mental support hub, supporting access to online counselling, or minimising barriers and wait times for RRR families seeking to access health specialists.

Section 5
Case studies

Introduction

Case studies are a storytelling tool designed to represent student, teacher, and principal experiences of student retention to year 12. The purpose of these case studies is to tell stories about effective retention strategies and the impacts they can have. The case studies address the following factors related to retention:

Figure 6: Factors relating to student retention addressed by case studies.
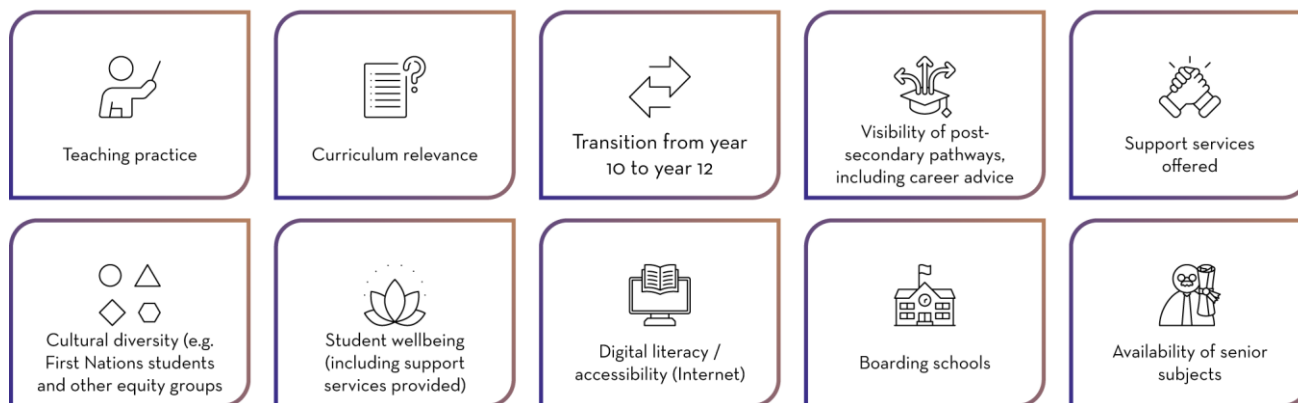
The names of staff, students, principals, and schools are fictionalised, and story elements are amalgamated from stakeholder interviews and survey responses to protect anonymity of research participants.

Case study 1: Sam - school principal

This case study will look at teaching practice, support services offered, student wellbeing and availability of senior subjects.

Sam had 10 years of experience as a teacher in Sydney before moving to Wilcannia to start as a principal at the local Twickenham High. Sam started to notice that policies and strategies that were successful in Sydney weren't having the same effect at his new school in Wilcannia. Likewise, some strategies that did work at metropolitan schools weren't being utilised at Twickenham High.

Sam noticed that the school had an advantage in its size – it could provide better pastoral care and emphasise work-life balance to prospective staff. However, the school's structure and processes still emulated a larger school. Sam thought this might be contributing to gaps in retention and education outcomes.

While the school was operating with four separate 'factions' or 'houses', this had meant a distributed responsibility for pastoral care. This division had worked in his school in Sydney, but the new school in Wilcannia didn't have access to the same resources and training. Sam centralised the pastoral care into one physical hub and reinvigorated staff to provide individualised, focused care for each student. The new pastoral care centre facilitated collaboration between teachers in different houses and became the school's competitive edge over alternatives:

> "... we're doing pastoral care at its best, no one would ever choose another school over us, because of the care we give...".

Some staff were surprised at the take-up of the new pastoral care centre and wellbeing services. Demand started to exceed staff capacity and attendance had improved but not as much as Sam had hoped. Sam said the renewed focus on wellbeing had led to students feeling more comfortable to reach out, and access support that was previously unavailable. After seeing the increase in demand, the staff connected with Headspace, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, and started a Wellbeing Week at the school. Sam decided to recruit two new staff. Through partnership with Rural Health, an occupational therapist student who had completed her practical unit at the school was offered a job. A counsellor from a metropolitan area was looking for a better work-life balance. Sam emphasised the supportive community, and work-life balance of teaching at a rural school to the two prospective staff, who both valued these aspects and started working at the school, supporting the pastoral care centre.

Sam realised that the structure of timetables and upper school classes was contributing to disengagement of general students. Year 11 and Year 12 classes had previously combined general and ATAR students in one room to save on costs and teaching capacity. These students perceived that the content was either not relevant to their unit, or "too hard". Sam separated general and ATAR students to separate classes. General students did four days a week at school and one day at industry or TAFE, alleviating the teachers' workloads and allowing for introduction of more general units like art and drama. Introducing flexibility with class structure and course content allowed the school to offer a wider range of subjects to meet student abilities and interests.

After the first 12 months, student mental health needs were being addressed, daily attendance rates had improved, staff satisfaction had increased, and enrolments for Year 11 and Year 12 classes were higher than last year, especially in the new courses that Sam was able to offer. Flexibility in school policy and approach had allowed Sam to mix and match strategies that work at metropolitan schools and adapt them to local needs.

Case studies are an amalgamation of student, teacher, principal and school staff experiences of student retention to year 12. Sam is not the real name of a principal and Twickenham High is not the name of a real school.

Case study 2: Sarah and Tahnee - teacher and student

This case study will look at curriculum relevance, transition from year 10 to year 12, visibility of post-secondary pathways including career advice and cultural diversity.
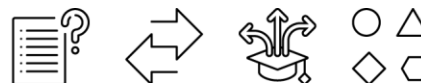
Sarah is a teacher in a regional town outside of Adelaide. The town has a higher proportion of Aboriginal students than most surrounding towns. Sarah noticed that retention and engagement of students had declined over time and was lower than neighbouring schools. Sarah was taught about two-way learning from cultural competency training in her previous job. Two-way learning describes the parallel appreciation of Western curriculum knowledge with Indigenous Knowledge. She believed this was something that could benefit the school and help improve student retention.

Sarah proposed that the school staff complete cultural competency training in hopes of engaging the children through further education. The training sessions helped teachers understand the importance of culture, and balancing a Western understanding of knowledge and learning with traditional cultural methods. Through the training, Kaurna Elders began facilitating sessions with the students to help them learn about culture, Country, and local history. The science department took the opportunity to integrate the curriculum alongside this knowledge. The school started funding practical excursions with Elders that involved traditional fishing practices and using grass tree resin to make glue. The science teachers followed these excursions with lessons about the underlying science principles: Year 10 students dissected the fish they caught to learn about fish anatomy, and the teacher explained how the atomic make-up of resin from grass trees with carbon from charcoal and fibre from kangaroo faeces makes an effective glue.

Sarah noticed that a girl in her class was falling behind her peers and missing days of school. This student, Tahnee, was a 15-year-old girl from a Kaurna family outside of Adelaide. Tahnee was the youngest of six children, and all of her siblings had left high school earlier than Year 12. Her brothers had left to work in trades or taken opportunities from the boy's academy in bigger regional town, while her sisters had left to support the family's aging grandparents and move to the city for employment opportunities. Sarah made an effort through the semester to spend more time talking to Tahnee and understand what her goals were. After the program, Sarah checked in with Tahnee to gain her feedback. Tahnee said the program had sparked an interest in marine life, nature, and the river by the town. Sarah suggested to Tahnee that the biology units offered in Year 11 and Year 12 could help Tahnee work in fields related to marine life and water systems. Tahnee was still uncertain about the workload, and about balancing her family duties with school responsibility. Sarah spoke to the principal about mixing general and ATAR units for Tahnee, so that she could pick the ATAR units for the subjects she was interested in, combined with less intensive units so that she could still fulfil her family obligations and have time for her friends who were choosing a general pathway.

Feeling supported by staff to pursue her interests and engaged by new cultural practices at the school, Tahnee decided to enrol in Year 11 and do a mix of ATAR and general subjects so that she could work with marine life in the future.

Case study 3: Peter - principal

This case study will look at digital literacy/accessibility, visibility of post-secondary pathways., including career advice and boarding schools.

Peter has been a principal for 6 years now at Montgomery High School in Kununurra, WA. Primary school attendance had recently improved, but attendance rates and retention to Year 12 at the high school were struggling. Peter thought this may be due to lack of long-term incentivisation for school, employment prospects. And teacher turnover. After talking to colleagues working in other towns in the Kimberley, Peter found that some schools had similar issues while others had creative solutions.

Peter initiated a range of new strategies:

- A 'community of practice' with other schools in the Kimberley
- A support program for new teachers
- Collaboration with local businesses

Peter was interested in how different schools in the region had experienced these issues. He decided to start a monthly community of practice – bringing staff together (digitally at first) to discuss retention issues and solutions. Teachers in the meeting noted that many students had disengaged in class because they were hungry, or didn't have enough uniforms or clothes. Peter contacted clothing charities in Perth about donating clothes, and suggested that staff rotate responsibility to bring up clothes into town. Peter was also able to implement a basic lunch program. This meant students had a back-up option and didn't have to go without, or go home for food.

Through the meetings, staff also suggested that if they had more free time, they would appreciate upskilling and training in digital literacy for the children. Although schools were over 200km apart, the teachers made the effort to cover each other in relief periods to undertake upskilling and training to be able to offer new curriculum courses and digital literacy. With the new digital literacy skills training, staff could offer new information and communication units. This proved to be an enticing subject for students, and new technological infrastructure meant remote learning classes were also offered for units that otherwise wouldn't have enough enrolments, providing new reasons for students to stay on to Year 12.

Turnover had become a big issue for Peter and his school. A number of prospective staff had experienced 'culture shock' when they arrived in the remote town. The people flown in to work at the school didn't have their usual support networks, routines, and activities, and they suddenly had to change. Many of these potential teachers had lasted less than one semester at the school before returning home. One teacher had even refused to get off the plane, after already agreeing to a 12-month contract. The principal decided to make changes to prevent this culture shock and high turnover.

The principal decided to introduce a new welcoming procedure for fresh staff. Peter suggested to new staff that they arrive early on a weekend. He was then able to show them around the school on their first day and give them a tour of the town. With the new relief program, Peter could free up time to socialise new staff with teachers and community members, including explaining to them how they could benefit from the training and upskill arrangement in the region.

The principal had also noticed that many students in the town had gone to boarding schools and then to big cities for employment options. The principal decided to focus on connecting the curriculum in school with employment prospects in the local area. Recent government funding was sponsoring local businesses in town. The principal decided to partner with the businesses receiving this funding, and try to tailor the curriculum to improve local employability. Traineeships with these local businesses were offered as part of Year 11 and Year 12. After the new initiatives, enrolment in Year 11 and Year 12 subjects increased 30% over the previous year.

Case studies are an amalgamation of student, teacher, principal and school staff experiences of student retention to year 12. Peter is not the real name of a Principal and Montgomery High School is not the name of a real school.

Section 6
Appendices

Appendix 1: Secondary factors

This appendix will cover the secondary factors that were identified in interviews with stakeholders as affecting RRR student retention to Year 12. These factors and the associated responses from schools and education bodies were identified through analysis of data gathered in interviews, focus groups, and survey responses.

Secondary factors refer to influences that were mentioned multiple times across stakeholder interviews and survey responses, though with less prevalence than the primary factors, and in less than half of engagements overall. Secondary factors would typically be raised multiple times within an interview or were generally explicitly expressed as important in discussing strategies to improve student retention.

Secondary factors might also affect retention for metropolitan students. However, the impact of these factors may be greater in RRR areas because of social, cultural, economic, or geographic contextual factors that are less prevalent in major cities. For example, students getting legal access to alcohol at 18 is not unique to RRR areas, however they may be more likely to drink due to fewer entertainment options in their community or greater barriers to healthy stress management avenues.

The factors presented in this section were all roughly equally raised by stakeholders. As such, they have been presented in alphabetical order for ease of reference.

Early intervention

Several stakeholders raised the importance of early intervention in school completion, linking it to improved early experience of schooling, crucial in fostering a passion for learning, and substantially beneficial for identifying potential physical or mental illnesses that could impact a student's ability to learn and the resulting academic confidence.

> "I can't imagine why they would ever want to pursue another so-many-years of school when the whole lot from primary school has just been a real struggle." Secondary stakeholder

> "For high school retention, you've got to work on your primary level. You've got to get those kids captivated with the idea of staying on at school because once they in high school, it's almost too late." School staff

Strategies and approaches used in early intervention varied and were usually dependent on the year level that the intervention methods were targeted at. For example, some schools would begin career advice at the early secondary level so that RRR students would be thinking about their goals and pathways to job transition throughout their high school years. Other schools, at the primary level, would partner with local universities or TAFE courses where available to provide early, holistic wellbeing support and to give a better idea of any potential underlying learning issues.

Gendered expectations

Some stakeholders raised that as students got older, expectations of them based on their gender identity could influence their retention. For example, girls may be expected to take on a carer role within their family, whether that was caring for parents or other older family members, younger siblings, or in some instances their own children. Carer expectations could then impact retention by preventing a girl from attending school, due to a sense of familial responsibility and a lack of alternative carer options. Stakeholders who worked with girls noted that this same expectation was not present for boys. However, gendered expectations for boys typically presented through a tendency to leave school in year 9 or 10 to pursue apprenticeship pathways.

Stakeholders who worked in these spaces mainly addressed this factor through one-on-one or small group mentorship. These stakeholders raised that by visibly running activities, sport, or providing food within the school environment, boys would be more willing to reach out and voluntarily participate in programs, allowing an initial relationship to be developed between a mentor and the student. For girls, stakeholders did not raise a specific way to establish an initial relationship, however, did mention that providing specific support based on the student's need, such as providing prams for young mothers, helped to make those students more receptive to retention-based initiatives by showing that they had people they could trust to support them within the school.

Legal access to alcohol

Some school staff raised that if a student turns 18 then their legal access to alcohol can influence their decision to come to school by presenting an alternative way to spend time, or by impacting them the night before enough that they sleep through most of school the next day. This was noted to be dependent on how easily they can access alcohol and is further influenced by family and community values on alcohol. Additionally, alcohol usage may be a more impactful factor in RRR areas due to fewer entertainment options in a student's community or greater barriers to healthy stress management avenues. However, these staff were not aware of any strategies implemented by their school to specifically target legal alcohol usage in upper secondary students.

Mentoring

Mentoring, either one-on-one or in a small group, was raised by stakeholders as an effective way to improve RRR student retention. When discussing mentoring, stakeholders were typically referring to when third-party or not-for-profit organisations would be engaged by the school and would work with students and staff as part of their role.

Mentoring was noted to have several benefits. These included providing wellbeing and academic support for students, being able to bridge relationships between students and teachers, providing role models for students to increase aspirations and goals, and showing students the range of post-school options that are available to them.

> "Mentoring helps a lot in making visible the opportunities that do exist, and allowing for young people to take those opportunities and see a role model or a person that they can talk to and navigate that journey with." Secondary stakeholder

> "If you're the first in your family, then it's not something you would consider, it's out of your comfort zone, it's out of what you've known as a kid. Again for us, mentors help bridge that." Secondary stakeholder

Mentoring was noted to be especially beneficial for First Nations students, who could learn from and be inspired by First Nations mentors.

> "With the mentors, it's their relationships with the girls and their ability to really connect with them on a very respectful and trusted level. It enables them to have so many conversations that the girls are open to and building those high expectations and building the aspirations and helping the girls see that by finishing school it's going to provide so much more choice for them and just open so many more doors that they might not have opened easily otherwise. That's not to say that they wouldn't open, but maybe not quite as easily." Secondary stakeholder

While no stakeholders across any group spoke about mentoring as a barrier to retention, some stakeholders mentioned that the high number of organisations that schools could choose from (both online and in-person) was resulting in cases where a program was only in place for one or two years before being replaced by a

new one if the desired results were not being met. While not able to point to specific statistics, these stakeholders were concerned that a high program turnover would have a negative impact on students because of the relationships that would be lost and the risk of apathy towards new programs that get introduced, especially if a new program held values or ideals that contradicted previous ones.

Funding equity

Stakeholders raised feelings of frustration around inconsistent or non-intuitive funding approaches between RRR schools based on their remoteness, and between government, Catholic, and independent schools in RRR areas. Stakeholders who felt that funding was not consistent between these demographics also felt that funding differences negatively impacted a school's capacity to provide support for the needs of their student body.

> "It's definitely frustrating when you see some of the private schools getting federal funding for their third swimming pool, when we've got kids who can't afford to pay for uniform or for food." Secondary stakeholder

In some cases, where schools did not qualify for additional state government funding on the basis of location, some stakeholders noted that other schools did qualify, despite being closer to the city and perhaps innately better positioned to access academic and wellbeing support services as a result of their location.

> "I don't know that we would qualify because we're two hours from the city… but we've got schools 20 minutes out of the CBD, and they qualify." School staff

Stakeholders who worked in regional locations noted that the Direct Measure of Income funding model could misrepresent the funding that the school needed. The Direct Measure of Income model is an inversely proportional model of funding, so the more that parents can pay for, the less the government needs to. Regional schools can have a wider range of parent incomes, and so government funding could be allocated on the assumption that a significant number of parents could afford what the median income parents can afford. Because this might not reflect the actual funding from parent fees that the school receives, stakeholders noted that schools may have to reduce their fees in order to retain lower income parents. However, these stakeholders felt that over the current decade, the Direct Measure of Income model would be significantly reducing government funding that regional schools could receive, perhaps unjustifiably so, and this could impact on the extent of retention strategies and approaches that a school could then implement.

> "That change to a new funding model is substantially reducing the government funding over the period that's being staged in over this current decade … and that will impact on staffing levels and programs, and in some cases presents a threat to the viability of the schools." Secondary stakeholder

Stakeholders who worked in boarding environments expressed a desire for additional funding to account for the needs of students outside of the classroom, especially in RRR areas where students may have undiagnosed or untreated medical conditions that would take additional resources to support.

> "The lion's share of the work that needs to be done is after school. It's generally between three and through the evening, because that's more likely when the issues are going to manifest and present. We've asked the Department of Education around our ability to support our operations out of the educational funding, and they've clearly come back and categorically said, no, you cannot use education funding, so classroom funding, in hostel or boarding operations." Secondary stakeholder

Where government funding was not accessible, stakeholders noted that schools would try their best to provide a service regardless, with some mentioning that principals would cover certain costs from their own pocket in order to provide a particular service to a student in need.

It is important to note that stakeholder perceptions on funding may not be the complete picture or necessarily accurate when it comes to actual division of funding. Under the current legislated framework, Commonwealth recurrent funding for schools includes a base per-student amount, which is complemented by additional loadings to address specific areas of need. School location is one key loading, designed to provide extra funding for RRR schools. This is applied consistently across all schools, aiming to ensure an equitable distribution of Commonwealth funding. However, stakeholders felt that there could be room for greater transparency, communication, or intuition when it comes to funding allocations, so that school staff are not exposed to unnecessary stress around their school's capacity to provide support.

Online learning/distance education

Many stakeholders spoke positively about their school's capability to connect to the internet, and following this, their ability to deliver online learning or distance education. However, it should be noted that this could be a result of the research's engagement strategy, which was predominantly through phone calls and emails and which heavily favoured existing internet connection. Certain areas of the Northern Territory, for example, were noted to have limited to no internet access, and would likely face infrastructural barriers to online learning access.

Overall, though stakeholders were positive about their ability to deliver online learning, views on its effectiveness were mixed. In some cases, stakeholders felt that it was easier to pick up on issues when engaging with a student in a face-to-face context. However, other stakeholders were grateful that they were able to deliver subjects that aligned with student interests, such as specialist STEM courses, while having low student numbers in the class. Some stakeholders mentioned that typically, the preference of the students they worked with was to have a mixture of in-person and online learning.

Some school staff expressed a desire for a national foundation curriculum, that could be delivered entirely online or adapted by teachers, to cover perceived gaps in online learning support at the state government level. Stakeholders from independent schools noted that they would have to develop their own digital education content, due to an inability to access digital learning programs that were developed by their state government. This created strain on their staff, especially if new courses were introduced, and could draw funding allocation away from other strategies and approaches to support student retention.

> "There was a lot more freely available resources across sectors in New South Wales than there are here. Here, any Department of Education resources are locked away behind their firewall and not available. It means that independent schools are really having to develop their own, which means if you're launching new courses, that's a big drain on your staff." School staff

> "I feel quality is lost by trying to provide so many options for such a small population. Could there be any way to draw on the depth of curriculum materials and resources that is possible in states such as New South Wales, Victoria or Queensland?" School staff

> "I think it needs to be national rather than state based. Each of the states have distance education and provide resources, but it would be fantastic if a student in Halls Creek in outback Western Australia could be part of a science lesson in Melbourne." School staff

Some schools created digital learning in the form of YouTube content that could be accessed at a student's home through their parent's mobile phone. This approach allowed for content broadly tailored to student body interests and provided students with an opportunity to be in the videos, which created another avenue for them to engage with curriculum content.

Appendix 2: Literature review

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is predominantly to consider the factors influencing school retention and completion for Australian students, and in particular those in rural, regional, and remote (RRR) areas. For the purposes of this report, "regional, rural, and remote" areas are those that are located outside the major cities in Australia, a definition used in the Independent Review into Regional, Rural, and Remote Education report (Halsey, 2017).

Retaining students through to school completion has been shown to be essential in improving the employability, wellbeing, economic outcomes, and overall integration of young people as they progress in society (Allen et al., 2018). On a global scale, the link between wealth and student completion of school shows better outcomes for students who are economically advantaged and thus have more educational choices in terms of number, quality, and support to complete their schooling (Allen et al., 2018). Additionally, student retention has been shown to have a positive social, cultural, and economic influence on an individual's broader society as well as themselves (Allen et al., 2018; Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, 2018).

Australian studies echo these international findings, with students who complete Year 12 more likely to earn higher incomes and have better overall health and wellbeing outcomes (Lamb and Huo, 2017).

Why are kids leaving school early, and what could be done about it?

Global context

International studies into school retention have highlighted several risk factors that could impact a student's likelihood to complete school. In the United States, for example, research indicates that external factors typically not in the student's control can have a large impact – such as frequency of moving schools, education level of parents or guardians, socioeconomic demographic, or race (Lee-St. John et al., 2018). These external factors are often compounded with factors within the school environment, such as academic achievement or the student's personal cost-benefit assessment of their schooling (Lee-St. John et al., 2018). This literature indicates that early social-emotional skills and cognitive development is important in setting up a perceived value of schooling that could likely translate to an experienced benefit of schooling (Lee-St. John et al., 2018).

The effect of academic-related stress on school retention is also important to consider, as there is a strong correlation between student stress levels and academic motivation and engagement (Pascoe et al., 2020). The relation between academic stress and academic motivation has been identified across a variety of countries and does not seem to be a cultural phenomenon, as this relation was noted across a range of countries (Pascoe et al., 2020). This suggests that stress management intervention practices could have a positive impact on increasing student retention, particularly in non-metropolitan areas where external stressors may be more prevalent, or in cases where students are unwilling or unable to receive support from guardians or peers (Pascoe et al., 2020).

International examples of best practice

A range of solutions have been implemented globally in an effort to reduce students leaving school early. The timing for when these intervention methods are implemented can vary. For example, in the United States, certain intervention programs have been aimed at easing the transition between primary and secondary

school to assist students with coping with the adaptational demands, complexities and pressures that come with a new school environment (Lyche, 2010).

Australian context

Data from the Productivity Commission provides insight into the retention rate of students from Year 10 through to Year 12. This data indicates that in 2021, there was an apparent retention rate of 81.6% (Productivity Commission, 2022). It should be noted that the word "apparent" is used because the data tracks the overall numbers of students in Year 10 and then students in Year 12, meaning certain factors are not accounted for in the data, such as students repeating or skipping years at schools, students moving between states or countries, or students who are overseas (Productivity Commission, 2022). Data from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority shows room for improvement for the apparent retention rate of male students, who had a 77.7% retention rate in 2021 compared to an 85.5% retention rate for female students (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2021a). This data also shows a disparity between First Nations and non-First Nations students. While the apparent non-Indigenous retention rate is 82.7%, the retention of First Nations students is 60.5% (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2021a).

This difference in the retention rates of First Nations and non-Indigenous students could be correlated to location, as an estimated 61% of First Nations people live in regional or remote locations (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022a). This is backed by results from two key international studies that discuss educational standards within Australia, the Programme for International Student Assessment and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. Findings from these studies were used to inform the Independent Review into Regional, Rural, and Remote Education and showed that as distance from metropolitan areas increased, scores for the international assessment metrics dropped (Halsey, 2018).

Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare further highlights the difference in Year 12 retention rates in RRR areas. This data shows that in 2020, 92% of people in major cities aged 20-24 had a year 12 or equivalent certificate, while the percentage of people with the same qualifications in wider regional and remote areas was notably lower (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021b).

The estimated percentage of students in each state that receive Year 12 certifications is available from data provided by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. These percentages are divided into four categories: major cities, inner regional, outer regional, and remote/very remote areas. This data is represented graphically below and shows that major cities have higher certification rates than inner regional, outer regional, and remote/very remote areas. The exceptions to these are in the Northern Territory and Tasmania, where there are no major cities as classified by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority (2023).

Figure 7: Percentage of Year 12 certification by state/territory
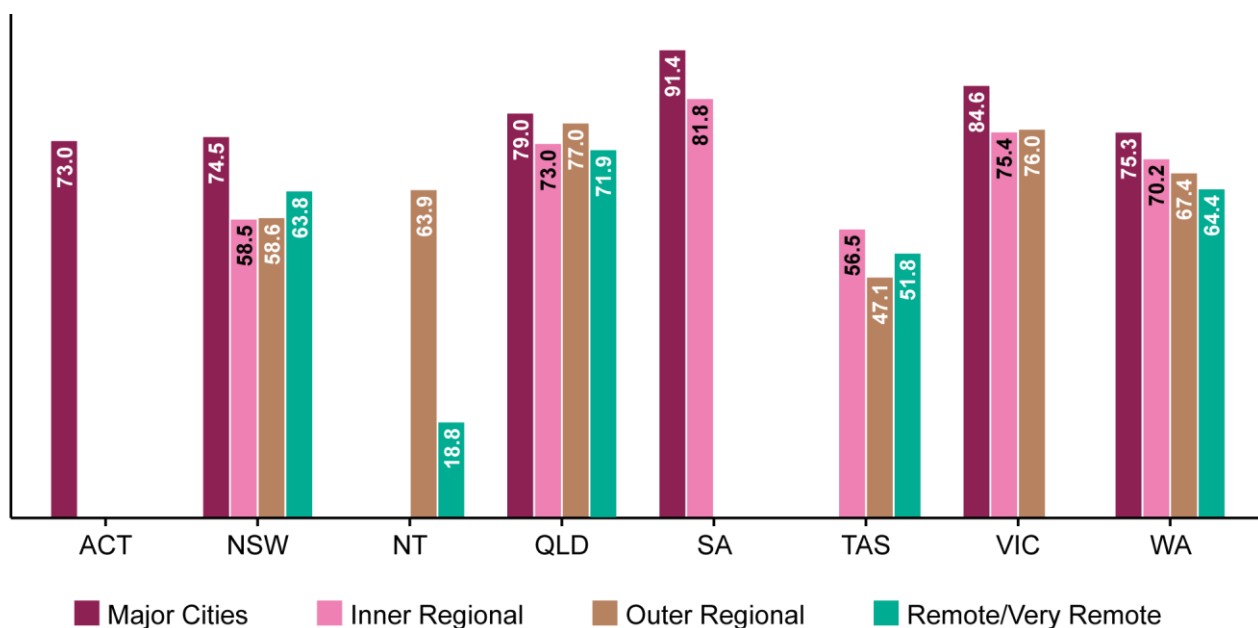
Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority, 2022

A number of government initiatives seek to improve on this correlation and decrease the reported retention gap between metropolitan students and those in rural, regional, and remote areas of Australia.

Initiatives within Australia to improve retention

National initiatives

Table 3: National initiatives to prove student retention.

Title	About	Year
National School Reform Agreement	Agreement between federal and state governments to implement eight policy initiatives to improve the Australian education system.	2018-2023
Napthine Review	A review of student engagement, retention, and education quality across Australia, with findings and recommendations. Also referred to as the National Regional, Rural, and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy.	2019
The Remote School Attendance Strategy	Initiative of the 2013 Abbott Government to improve student attendance by encouraging family support.	2014-2019
National Teacher Workforce Action Plan	Agreement by education ministers to address national teaching staff shortages through five priority areas that focus on attracting, developing, and retaining teachers.	2022-present

National School Reform Agreement

The National School Reform Agreement is an agreement signed between the Commonwealth, states, and territories that has the intention of creating better student outcomes. The agreement as a whole is informed by three key documents, which are the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, the Independent Review of Regional, Rural, and Remote Education, and the Optimising STEM Industry-School Partnerships report (Department of Education, 2022). The agreement covers eight "policy initiatives" that are expected to be implemented over a five-year period, until December 2023 (Department of Education, 2022).

To achieve these policy initiatives, the agreement has three reform directions that help to shape the initiatives, and each of these reform directions broadly cover a number of policy initiatives. These directions and their corresponding initiatives are as follows:
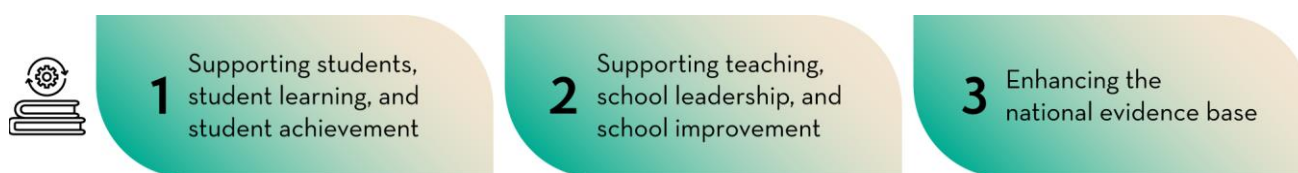
1. Supporting students, student learning, and student achievement

    a. Enhance the Australian Curriculum to support teacher assessment of student attainment and growth against clear descriptors.

    b. Assist teachers to monitor individual student progress and identify student learning needs through opt-in online and on demand student learning assessment tools with links to student learning resources, prioritising early years foundation skills.

    c. Review senior secondary pathways into work, further education, and training.

2. Supporting teaching, school leadership, and school improvement

    a. Develop a national strategy to help build understanding of how to attract and retain the best and brightest to the teaching profession and attract teachers to areas of need. The documents states that this is attainable through supporting better workplace planning and analysis of future workforce needs. In practice, an example of such an initiative is assisting with student loan repayments for teachers who decide to live and work in regional, rural, or remote communities

    b. Strengthen the initial teacher education accreditation system by ensuring quality, consistency, and transparency across Australia's teacher education programs.

3. Enhancing the national evidence base

    a. Provide a unique student number for every student to help identify and share information between schools, sectors, and states to support better understanding of student progress, protect student privacy and improve the national evidence base.

    b. Establish an independent national evidence institute to inform teacher practice, system improvement and policy development.

    c. Improve national data quality, consistency, and collection to improve the national evidence base and inform policy development. (Department of Education, 2018).

An independent review of the effectiveness of the initiatives and the appropriateness of their assessment metrics was completed by the end of 2022 by the Productivity Commission and released in January 2023. Findings from this review are positioned to inform the next national reform agreement (Department of Education, 2022).

Additionally, Education ministers in 2019 renewed their commitment to educational goals through the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, also called the Mparntwe Declaration. The renewal was to see a commitment that lasted through to 2029 and predicated itself on the following two goals: that education should continue to promote excellence and equity, and that all young Australians become confident and creative

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individuals, successful learners, and active and informed community members. (Department of Education, 2019).

Napthine Review

In 2019, the Government released the National Regional, Rural, and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy, commonly referred to as the Napthine Review (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). The Napthine Review involved a literature review, nationwide submissions, and consultations, and provided seven recommendations and 33 related actions for improving the tertiary educational access and outcomes of young people in regional, rural, and remote areas across Australia. The Napthine Review was in part a response to Recommendation 11 by the Independent Review into Regional, Rural, and Remote Education (The Halsey Review; Department of Education and Training, 2018), which suggested the government 'establish a national focus for regional, rural, and remote education, training and research to enhance access, outcomes and opportunities in regional Australia' (Department of Education and Training, 2018, p. 5). These reviews indicated that young people in regional, rural, and remote areas face difficulty transitioning from secondary to tertiary education and are less than half as likely to obtain tertiary education (university degree) by the age of 35.

Five main issues were put forward to explain this gap between metropolitan and people from regional, rural, and remote areas:

- **Access, opportunity and choice:** people living in regional, rural, and remote areas have disproportionately fewer opportunities for tertiary education.
- **Student support:** students living in regional, rural, and remote areas who want to complete tertiary education tend to receive less support for their goals and outcomes compared to students living in metropolitan areas.
- **Aspiration, career advice and schooling:** students in regional, rural, and remote areas tend to have less social and structural encouragement for tertiary education ambitions.
- **Equity groups:** Regional, rural, and remote areas do not have appropriate levels of support for students in equity groups who want to engage in education at higher levels. People in these groups may require additional support to overcome these barriers.
- **Regional development:** supporting educational development of people living in regional, rural, and remote areas can have a flow on benefit for other people living in those communities.

The Napthine Review also provides recommendations to address these issues, including:

- Implementing a regionally based model for independent, professional **career advice.**
- Improving online career related information and advice.
- Establishing **aspiration-raising initiatives** covering both VET and higher education.
- Expanding **access** to high quality VET programs in regional, rural, and remote schools.
- Undertaking further work to improve these schools and Year 12 completion rates, and.
- Improving support available to teachers, principals and school leaders (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019).

The Remote School Attendance Strategy

The Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) was an initiative of the 2013 Abbott government to improve attendance rates in regional, rural, and remote schools. The program employed approximately 500 people locally in RRR areas to support parents to encourage their children to improve their attendance. The program was attributed to an initial increase in attendance rates but a subsequent decline in attendance after 2016.

RRR school attendance declined by 7% between 2014 and 2019 where RSAS was active, and attendance declined by 8% in this period at RRR schools with more than 80% First Nations students (Guenthe et al., 2022). Suggested areas for improvement included a closer alignment in design between government and individual local perspectives, encouraging individualised assistance for students, and recognition of contextual factors in successful attendance.

National Teacher Workforce Action Plan

On 15 December 2022, education ministers agreed to a National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (NTWAP) to address the national issue of teacher workforce shortages in both government and non-government schools. The NTWAP sets out 27 actions across five priority areas to address this issue. These are:

1. Improving teacher supply, which aims to boost the number of people who select teaching as a career pathway.

2. Strengthening initial teacher education, which aims at improving the quality of teaching graduates.

3. Keeping the teachers we have, which aims to improve teacher retention rates through providing additional support to current teachers, reducing unnecessary workloads, developing career pathways, and supporting teachers to focus on core teaching tasks and collaboration.

4. Elevating the profession by recognising the value and contribution of teachers to students, communities, and the economy.

5. Better understanding future teacher workforce needs, which aims to improve the information available for teacher workforce planning. (Department of Education, 2023)

Teaching staff shortages and issues with staff retention are a particularly noteworthy challenge for RRR schools, students, and communities. As part of the action plan, specific initiatives are being considered for RRR areas, such as providing government and/or subsidised housing to help attract teachers to RRR areas (Minister for Home Affairs, 2022).

State initiatives

Table 4: State initiatives to improve student retention.

Title	About	Year
New South Wales 'Connected Communities'	A NSW program to improve regional, rural, and remote student retention focused on staff and leadership structures.	2013-present
New South Wales 'The Waratah Project'	A program by Association of Independent Schools NSW to improve educational outcomes for First Nations students.	2016-present
New South Wales 'Tell Them From Me' survey	An online survey for years 4 to 12, intended to show student perspectives on teaching practice, wellbeing, engagement, and attitudes toward school.	2021-present
Queensland 'Early School Leavers' survey	A survey completed by 12,264 students who didn't finish school shows a range of reasons why they left school before Year 12.	2021-2022
New South Wales 'Rural and Remote Education Strategy 2021-2024'	NSW Government strategy for rural and remote education with four focuses: people, practice, participation, and partnerships.	2021-2024
South Australian 'Country Education Strategy'	A seven-year initiative to improve educational outcomes in regional, rural, and remote areas	2021-2028
Northern Territory 'Review of Secondary Education'	A Strategic Review of Secondary Education centred around learning, support systems, transitions between years, and community partnerships.	2023

At a state level, a number of states have conducted independent reviews to gather community feedback from RRR students, parents, and teachers. Interestingly, these state-based consultations yielded similar results. In New South Wales, consultations found that there were four key areas to address, those being people, practice, participation, and partnerships (NSW Department of Education, 2021). People has the goal of supplying RRR students with more high-quality educators that are "aware of localised needs" (NSW Department of Education, 2021). Practice involves teachers utilising a broader, more locally contextualised, and engaging curriculum. Participation seeks to develop wellbeing through community connection for both students and staff, while 'partnerships' involves developing partnerships with post-school options providers such as higher education, vocational education, or local industries (NSW Department of Education, 2021).

These areas are mirrored by the Queensland Government's own consultation process, which remap the above four concepts into three key areas to focus on – enhancing student potential, valuing our people, and building positive partnerships (State of Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2017). The Queensland report also puts a considerable focus on the need to develop relationships with First Nations communities in RRR areas.

In Victoria, a unique initiative employed acknowledges that while parents and guardians have a responsibility to drop their children off at school, this could be a potential barrier. As such, and in collaboration with the Department of Transport, it has created the School Bus Program to assist with transporting students to school regardless of whether the school is government-funded or not (Department of Education and Training, 2022).

New South Wales 'Connected Communities'

Connected Communities is a NSW program to improve RRR student retention. Active since 2013 in 15 RRR schools across the state, the program is designed to encourage retention through individual focus on student learning and goals, emphasis on partnerships with Aboriginal communities, and application of the OCHRE principle (Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment). A recent evaluation suggested that Connected Communities is valued by school staff, attendance has improved in primary schools but not secondary schools, and that varied attendance between schools may be attributed to environmental factors and staff engagement (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020). The evaluation suggested that the following aspects contributed to program successes:

- implementation led by Executive Principal roles with three-year contracts
- a two-tiered governance structure at a department level and local level
- recruitment of a community engagement leader for each school
- a School Reference Group with parents, Aboriginal Elders or Aboriginal Community members, a parents and citizen representative, and the Executive Principal.

Additional success factors included cultural awareness training with staff, emphasis on Aboriginal language and culture in school, a focus on individual student pathways into and out of school, and $35 million for refurbishments, rebuilds and improvements across all schools in two phases.

Queensland 'Early School Leavers' survey

The Queensland government provides data for an early school leaver survey, which highlights alternative pathways taken by students who don't complete Year 12 in addition statistics on the reason why they leave. Insights were based on a sample size of 12,264 students who left school prior to completing Year 12 (Queensland Government Department of Education, 2022).

The survey categorises respondents into three main channels. These are based on the pathways that early school leavers take and provide further insight into data provided by the report. These channels are:

- In education or training (including those who are both studying and working, or those who are in an apprenticeship)

- In employment only

- Not in education, training, or employment (Queensland Government Department of Education, 2022).

The survey continues by presenting six main reasons for why students left school early. These were:

- To get a job/apprenticeship

- Did not like school

- Health reasons

- Behaviour of other students disrupted study

- Study options did not meet needs

- Difficult academically (Queensland Government Department of Education, 2022).

Of these reasons, respondents in the "education or training" channel were most likely to select "to get a job/apprenticeship" as their reason for leaving. For those in "employment only", the primary reason for leaving was identified as "difficult academically" (42.8%) although this was closely followed with "did not like school" (40.4%). For those who were in neither education, training, nor employment, "health reasons" was the primary reason for leaving school early (Queensland Government Department of Education, 2022).

New South Wales 'The Waratah Project'

The Association of Independent Schools NSW began a pilot project in 2016 to improve educational outcomes for First Nations students. Referred to as 'the Waratah Project', the initiative involved individualised teaching support, pastoral care, a dedicated Indigenous student support role, and staff development. The Waratah Project has contributed to improved literacy and numeracy skills, increased aspiration for further and higher education, connection and pride with culture, improved relationships between students, improved cultural competency of teaching staff, and improved social and emotional wellbeing. This has been evidenced by two independent evaluations (Jumbunna Institute, 2020; Murawin, 2022). The program has since been expanded from four schools in the pilot phase, to 25 day and boarding schools across the state (Association of Independent Schools NSW, n.d.).

New South Wales 'Tell Them From Me' survey

The Tell Them From Me survey is a New South Wales-based online survey system that is used to capture student perspectives from Year 4 to Year 12 in all government schools. The survey aims to capture data on student engagement, wellbeing, and attitudes towards teaching practices, and allows scope for individual schools to have their own custom questions (NSW Government, 2022).

Though the direct findings are only available to organisations which have access to the survey portal, analysis was conducted through a between NSW Department of Education, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, and the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland.

Three key findings were identified. First, positive engagement and effective teaching practices positively influence Year 12 completion. Second, students from low socioeconomic background are more likely to be disengaged. Third, engaging with students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds increases their likelihood of completing Year 12 (McCourt and Ikutegbe, 2019).

Survey findings also highlighted the important role that challenge (that is, that their classes handled more difficult or challenging material overall) has on students, after factoring in prior academic achievement and socioeconomic status. Students who reported higher levels of challenge were more likely to complete Year 12

than those who found that schoolwork was too easy or too boring (McCourt and Ikutegbe, 2019). This was particularly evident in high-performing students who were not satisfied with the academic or intellectual challenge that their school experience was providing (McCourt and Ikutegbe, 2019).

Additionally, student perception of teachers was shown to have an impact on likelihood of Year 12 completion. Students who felt that their teachers were supportive, treated them fairly, and who got along with them were predicted to have a higher school completion rate, when socioeconomic background and academic performance were similar (McCourt and Ikutegbe, 2019).

New South Wales 'Rural and Remote Education Strategy 2021-2024'

The Rural and Remote Education Strategy 2021-2024 is a NSW initiative to improve outcomes in RRR areas. Development of the strategy involved 2293 consultations and 519 surveys (NSW Department of Education, 2021).

Approximately 43% of schools and 25% of students in NSW are in RRR areas (NSW Department of Education, n.d.). The Rural and Remote Education Strategy 2021-2024 outlines four priority areas for improving school retention in these areas. These are people, practice, participation and partnerships.

The 'people' priority emphasises the importance of supplying quality teaching staff. The NSW Government have indicated this will involve working with universities to encourage RRR placements, and improving opportunities for teachers in these areas to retrain. The 'practice' priority refers to contextualised curriculums, learning plans, communities of practice, and location-specific training opportunities for RRR staff. 'Participation' refers to empowering staff to address the specific engagement needs of students and their communities, improving access to wrap-around support services, cultural awareness training for staff, and awareness campaigns for early education enrolments. 'Partnerships' refers to linkages between secondary education, tertiary education institutions, vocational education providers designed to improve engagement and retention.

Northern Territory 'Review of Secondary Education'

A Strategic Review of Secondary Education in the Northern Territory was commissioned by the Northern Territory Department of Education (Deloitte, 2023). This was published in the context of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration that set goals for Australian policy to support equity of outcomes and individual excellence for all young Australia (Department of Education, 2019). The Deloitte review covers five domains of secondary education and reports a series of findings and recommendations. The five domains are:

6. recognition of learning
7. learning access and design
8. system of supports
9. transitions between school and beyond school
10. partnerships and engagement.

Examples of initiatives from these domains include the NT Certificate of Education and Training (NTCET), which supports individualised learning and allows students to complete their schooling certification through a range of methods similar to 'micro-credentialing'. This segmentation of certification to smaller milestones could help improve student retention rates. The NT are also trialling Aboriginal cultural knowledge and language pilots to support cultural diversity in the state. Career advice was an additional area for improvement, supporting transition between years and beyond school. NT policy has previously encouraged boarding schools for secondary education, based on the Indigenous Education Review and Transition Support Unit. Emphasis on boarding has since been identified as a barrier to student retention, and an opportunity for change. More local options for secondary education are now encouraged to support retention.

South Australian 'Country Education Strategy'

The South Australian Country Education Strategy 2021-2028 is a seven-year initiative to improve educational outcomes in RRR areas (Department for Education South Australia, 2021). The Strategy is designed to support consistency of outcomes across metropolitan and regional, rural, and remote areas and comprises three main goals with subsequent action items. The first goal is to support and incentivise teachers in RRR areas. Example actions for this goal include advertising RRR teaching vacancies before metropolitan vacancies, and reviewing salary and housing incentives for teachers in RRR areas.

The second goal is to improve RRR access to standard systems, and behavioural and learning support. As an action to address this, South Australia have connected more than 99% of all schools in the state to high-speed internet through the SwiFT initiative with Telstra (Department for Education South Australia, 2023). The state is also emphasising telephone consults for behavioural and psychological support.

The final goal is to assist RRR education pathways. Example actions for this include encouraging individualised learning plans, school-based traineeships and introducing an online career advisory service available to all students across the state from 2024 onwards (Department for Education South Australia, 2023).

Factors related to student retention

Boarding

Boarding schools provide a unique social and learning environment for students. Independent Schools Australia estimate that in 2020 there were 210 boarding schools across the country, with roughly 0.6 of Australian students being boarders. Though this estimated number appears low, for many families in RRR areas, boarding is the only practical or desired option to access academic, social, or employment opportunities (Independent Schools Australia, 2022). Available research shows that there is little difference in academic outcomes between boarding and non-boarding students (Independent Schools Australia, 2022). Though wellbeing of boarding students often improves, it is important to note that there may be an initial period where the wellbeing of boarding students is lower than non-boarding students, often because they need to adjust to a new environment (Dillon et al., 2022).

Boarding for First Nations students

First Nations boarders made up 15% of all boarders across both metropolitan and RRR independent schools in 2020 (Independent Schools Australia, 2022). For these First Nations boarders, there are unique difficulties that may need to be overcome when compared to non-Indigenous boarders. For example, the schooling environment could feel alienating in both an educational and cultural sense if they are coming from a rural or remote location (Dillon et al., 2022). Other potential barriers to school participation could include language proficiencies, for example if English is a second language for the student, or a greater impact from being removed from a home community (Dillon et al., 2022). Additionally, for those students who come from a predominantly First Nations community, attending a boarding school could also mean having to adjust to an environment with a stark cultural difference that may include racism or lateral violence, that is, discrimination from other First Nations students (Dillon et al., 2022). Additionally, First Nations students may hold concerns over a loss of connection to language, culture, and county that might occur if they remain in their boarding school (Barrett, 2019). This provides a difficult decision for First Nations students, especially if they also want to make use of the work, educational and social opportunities presented by the boarding school environment (Barrett, 2019).

On a positive note, and although available data is limited and often academically focused, data suggests that First Nations boarders do tend to improve in their social wellbeing over time (Dillon et al., 2022). The unique

challenges posed by the boarding environment creates a further need for cultural aspects to be considered as part of the schooling experience.

Bullying

Current literature and survey responses from Australian states highlight that creating an engaging and secure environment for students has positive impacts on their likelihood to complete high school. Bullying – either physical (such as assault), verbal (such as insults or threats), or cyber (bullying that occurs on social media, text messaging, or other digital means) – disrupts this and can impact the engagement that students have both in and out of the classroom. Current literature highlights that victims of bullying may experience greater levels of absenteeism, problems with schoolwork, greater risk of mental ill-health, or a feeling that the school is no longer a safe environment for them (Rigby, 2020).

In a report conducted by PwC Consulting, bullying costs an estimated $180 million to the economy, comprised of both students who miss classes in order to avoid harassment or out of safety concerns, and for students who are forcibly removed from the school environment by means of suspension or expulsion (2018).

Recent estimates suggest that, in Australia, at least one in four students have experienced bullying victimisation (Islam, Khanam and Kabir, 2020). Additionally, students in higher grades and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be bullied (Islam, Khanam and Kabir, 2020). This is an important social context to consider: students in RRR areas are more likely to come from families with a lower income when compared to metropolitan families (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022c). Though literature is limited, this could mean that RRR students are at greater risk of both bullying and the subsequent effects on likelihood of school completion.

Culturally and linguistically diverse students

An increasing number of Australian families speak more than one language at home, with recent data suggesting that approximately 25% of families speak a language other than English at home (Syeda and Dresens, 2020). Additionally, a positive sense of belonging at school has been shown to be fundamental in the academic success of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Schweitzer et al., 2021).

There may be opportunities to increase the capability of teachers to facilitate engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse students, especially if proficiency with English is a barrier to learning (Gilmour et al., 2018). This is noted in studies that surveyed teachers in Australian schools, who found that staff were aware of their potential for greater cultural awareness and its associated benefits on teaching in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom (Gilmour et al., 2018). However, there remains an opportunity to identify what culturally and linguistically diverse students consider effective in fostering engagement, and actions teachers can take to positively create a sense of belonging for them.

Digital factors

In Australia, access to digital technologies and spaces is measured by the Australian Digital Inclusion Index. The index, which measures a variety of factors, found that 11% of the population was highly excluded, though this is a decrease since 2020 (Thomas et al., 2021). Additionally, the index report highlighted that digital inclusion increased with greater proximity to metropolitan areas as well as with education levels (Thomas et al., 2021). In RRR areas, access may also be affected by availability of stock in retail stores (Brown et al., 2020).

The metropolitan/regional divide is also evident within the teaching space, as studies have noted that the odds of teachers using computers to access information were higher in major cities when compared to teachers in regional or remote areas (Vassallo and Warren, 2017).

The impact of Covid-19 on the schooling environment highlighted challenges that may be faced by students and families living in RRR areas. In a survey of teachers across both Australia and New Zealand in 2020, concerns were raised about the availability of access to technologies necessary for learning such as computers and reliable internet connection, particularly in RRR and other low socioeconomic areas (Flack et al., 2020). These concerns appear to corroborate with the metro/regional divide in digital inclusion that was noted in the Australian Digital Inclusion Index report.

Beyond simply access to technology, other household factors that can impede on digital inclusion in RRR areas are:

- the affordability of required technology
- the digital competency of guardians to assist students with technological issues
- the number of devices available for students to use, for example if a household has one laptop that needs to be shared between multiple family members or students (Brown et al., 2020)

These factors may further impede engagement with learning, and as a result could influence the likelihood that a student completes their schooling (Brown et al., 2020).

Exclusionary policies

Recent research has suggested an opportunity to improve student retention by shifting away from exclusionary policies, which are disciplinary actions such as suspensions and expulsions (Graham et al., 2022). Exclusionary policies can separate children from school, increase disengagement, and increase the risk of involvement with the juvenile justice system (Hemez et al., 2020).

Data from Western Australia suggests a greater proportion of Aboriginal students from secondary schools in RRR areas have been suspended (38%) compared to all of WA (15%) (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2022). Similar findings have been shown in other states, with disproportionate increases of suspensions for Indigenous students in Queensland between 2013-2019, and (Graham et al., 2022; Graham et al., 2020).

Overall, approaches that are positive, holistic, and support-focused are recommended over exclusionary policies. For First Nations students, approaches that emphasise a connection to Country, community, and culture have been shown to be more effective (Pyne, 2019).

First Nations students

The apparent retention rate of First Nations students is well below the apparent retention rate of non-Indigenous students, with just over a 20% difference (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2021a). The Closing the Gap report indicates that, similarly to overall trends in the country, the number of First Nations students who complete Year 12 decreases with distance from metropolitan hubs (Australian Government, 2020). It also notes that goals to halve the gap in First Nations school attendance were not met in any state or territory (Australian Government, 2020). The report indicates that early intervention practices, sometimes before children start school itself, are beneficial in improving school retention, as gaps in attendance typically carry through and widen once students reach high school (Australian Government, 2020). In terms of sex-based differences in retention rate, First Nations girls were more likely to complete Year 12, which aligns with non-Indigenous retention rate trends (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021a).

Generally, RRR schooling consultations have identified a need for content to be tailored to communities. This is backed by data from the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report, which identified that mainstream educational programs need to be adapted to fit a First Nations context in order to help First Nations students engage with an educational space (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision,

2020). This could be done through incorporating cultural awareness, cultural inclusion, social engagement, and literacy support, or through enabling access to non-academic resources such as food or clean clothing (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2020).

Research in RRR areas has indicated a range of supportive factors for First Nations student retention. Cultural security was a key factor, with actionable changes including designated space for First Nations students and cultural security training for staff and policymakers (Wilks et al., 2020). Family contact was an important factor, as well as facilitating family duties and obligations for older students, and acknowledging any language barriers in assessment practices. Partnering with communities to design and operate retention strategies can also be successful as this recognises that no single strategy will be successful everywhere, due to differences between and within communities (Schulz et al., 2023). For First Nations students in RRR locations, individualised lesson plans and face-to-face teaching were also identified as crucial success factors, in part due to variable ICT connectivity.

A systematic review examined a range of enablers and barriers for educational outcomes of First Nations students (Guenthe et al., 2019). The review found that aspiration and motivation did not seem to differ between RRR and metropolitan areas. Rather, the availability of RRR opportunities impacted retention, and definitions of success for communities tended to centre around community involvement in schooling and job readiness.

LGBTQIA+ identification

School environments that are perceived as safe and inclusive for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) students have been shown to improve educational outcomes, school retention, mental health, and overall wellbeing for those students (Beasy et al., 2021). Despite this, the school environment is also noted as one of the most common places that LGBTQIA+ young people will encounter physical or verbal abuse (Beasy et al., 2021). While this may be from peers, in some instances this form of prejudice may come from school staff engaging with microaggressions or reinforcing ideas around homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia (Beasy et al., 2021). Studies have shown that the presence of these factors can detrimentally affect emotional and psychological wellbeing, as well as the student's ability to engage with education (McBride and Neary, 2021).

Combined with the risks that experiencing bullying can have on student engagement in general, a student's sexual or gender identification is an important factor that may need to be considered when looking at improving retention rates or best practice options in Australian schools.

School refusal

'School refusal' is an increasingly topical issue for student retention. There is no nationally agreed definition for the term, but it generally refers to children avoiding school because of social and/or emotional stressors (Education and Employment References Committee, 2023). National survey data of 1003 parents showed that approximately 39% agree their child had shown school refusal in the past 12 months (The Greens, 2023). School refusal may be more prevalent in regional areas due to limited access to wellbeing services, according to data from the Victorian Government (Education and Employment References Committee, 2023). Social and emotional issues for students in RRR areas may be more prevalent in smaller schools where access to services is limited, or difficult to reach.

Socioeconomic status

In Australia, families in metropolitan areas tend to report higher incomes when compared to families in RRR locations (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022c). Studies have also found that students considered to be socioeconomically advantaged had higher Year 12 retention rates than those from lower socioeconomic areas, with 24% being top performers compared to 6% of those without a socioeconomic advantage

(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). Additionally, Year 12 completion rates rise linearly with increases in socioeconomic groups, as defined by the Socio-Economic Index for Areas that was developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Lamb et al., 2020).

The Educational Opportunity in Australia 2020 report suggests that this could stem from early childhood, with children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds being less likely to attend preschool, and less developmentally ready for the schooling environment (Lamb et al., 2020), a finding also supported by the Napthine Review (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). Available research also suggests that socioeconomic impact on school completion could be a result of limited resources at home (such as access to books or technology), parental understanding of classroom structures and expectations, and entering high school with lower grades (Barrett, 2019).

Students with disabilities

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare provides statistics on completion rates for schooling and higher education, for people with disabilities. These statistics, though not factored by geographical location, point to higher rates of completion for students without disabilities than those who do. Specifically, data provided indicates that of people aged 15-64, 21% of people who acquired disability before age 15 ended up leaving school before age 16 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022b). Similar statistics are provided for those who acquired disability after age 15, with 23% leaving before age 16 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022b). This is compared to students without disability, of whom 8.9% left school before Year 12 completion (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022b). Though the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare acknowledges that these rates are decreasing in recent years (2022b), the high values indicate that disability is an important factor to consider when considering school retention overall.

Future options

Overall, state-based programs and surveys consistently highlighted a community desire for a contextualised yet broad curriculum. This curriculum should facilitate a range of tertiary or vocational interests, involve high-quality teaching staff who are aware of and adaptable to community needs, and include greater community, First Nations, and industry connections and partnerships.

In Queensland, there have been positive outcomes regarding addressing community concerns, noted in 2020 results from government initiatives. These initiatives included creating Centres for Learning and Wellbeing that provide professional learning opportunities for staff, staff residency housing, programs to allow urban teachers to experience living in RRR communities, and training for home tutors and parents (Queensland Government, 2021). Through these efforts, Queensland saw retention of teachers increase by nearly 4% in three years, 100% of regional and remote schools forming partnerships with local communities in two years, and a greater percentage of primary school children earning a C grade in English than in 2017 (Queensland Government, 2021).

Aspects of these are mirrored in other states – for example, Western Australia has its own version of teacher residency support in RRR areas, the Northern Territory has initiatives for early learning and parent support programs, and Victoria facilitates urban teachers at least partially teaching in RRR areas via employment-based pathways.

Additionally, Victoria aims to ease digital burdens by improving internet access in over 300 schools, assisting with the provision of virtual access to a broader range of Victorian Certificate of Education courses, and encouraging collaboration between schools in communities via the Victorian Certificate of Education Collaboration Fund (Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students, 2019).

Literature highlights the benefits of developing social-emotional and cognitive skills at an early age and stress the importance of intervention methods that teach stress management and reduction skills. Additionally,

students and teachers are likely to have "strong views about what it takes to effectively manage learning and behaviour" (Egeberg and McConney, 2019). To assist with fostering classroom engagement, the factors that students and teachers think impact effective classroom management should be considered as this would likely provide a diverse set of responses that are contextualised to varying schools and teaching environments (Egeberg and McConney, 2019). Student perspectives are captured in some states through post-school surveys, but there is scope for this to be captured across all states and territories (Productivity Commission, 2021).

Many Australian universities offer bridging or enabling courses in order to assist with diversifying the student body that can access university courses. These courses are designed to provide alternative entry pathways to tertiary education. There is opportunity to assess the promotion of these courses at a school level, as promoting alternative entry requirements to universities may positively impact students who could feel like they do not meet common academic standards for entry.

The literature covered at the start of this review, in conjunction with the findings from Australian-based consultations mentioned at the beginning of this section, provide a guideline for future initiatives to decrease the retention gap between metropolitan and non-metropolitan students.

Summary

What we know about school retention and regional, rural, and remote education

- International research demonstrates that completing high school or an equivalent level of education is an important factor in improving the employability, wellbeing, economic outcomes, and overall integration of young people in society.

- Internationally recognised factors affecting school completion include frequency of moving schools, parental education levels, race, and socioeconomic bracket. Academic achievement and a student's personal cost-benefit analysis of schooling were also noted.

- There is a strong correlation between student stress levels and academic motivation and engagement, indicating that stress management techniques may be beneficial in increasing school completion rates in regional, rural, and remote areas. This correlation was noted across several countries and cultures.

- In Australia, female students are more likely to complete Year 12 than male students, and non-Indigenous students are more likely to complete Year 12 than First Nations students.

- The National School Reform Agreement has three main goals to create better Australian student outcomes: to support students (including student learning and achievement), support teachers (including school leadership and improvement), and increasing the national evidence base for student information. These are expected to be implemented over a five-year period, ending in December 2023.

- State level surveys of students, teachers, and guardians in regional, rural, and remote areas found similar results. These surveys indicated a community desire for more high-quality teachers and educators in these areas, a locally contextualised and engaging curriculum, developing wellbeing through community connection for both teachers and students, and partnerships with post-school options such as vocational education or local industries. There have also been calls for greater involvement with local First Nations communities.

- State surveys of students who leave schools early found that common reasons for leaving school included: to get a job/apprenticeship, not liking school, health reasons, the behaviour of other students, study options not meeting needs, or finding academic challenges.

- Additionally, state surveys found that positive engagement and effective teaching practices positively influence Year 12 completion, students from low socioeconomic background are more likely to be disengaged, and that engaging with students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds increases their likelihood of completing Year 12.

- School refusal is an increasingly topical issue for student retention. Recognition of social and emotional wellbeing factors in school life can be an important success factor for preventing school refusal and supporting student retention.

What we know about social and cultural factors that influence school completion

- Families in metropolitan areas are more likely to report higher incomes than those in regional, rural, or remote areas. Additionally, students who are socioeconomically advantaged are more likely to complete Year 12.

- Socioeconomic differences could be due to children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds being less likely to attend preschool or less developmentally ready for the schooling environment. It could also be a result of limited resources at home (such as access to books or technology), lower parental

understanding of classroom structures and expectations, or a result of entering high school with lower grades than their fellow students.

- The number of First Nations students who complete Year 12 decreases with distance from metropolitan hubs. Closing the Gap goals to decrease this difference were not met in any state or territory in 2020.

- Mainstream educational programs need to be adapted to fit a First Nations context, in order to help students engage with an educational space. This could be done by incorporating cultural awareness, cultural inclusion, social engagement, literacy support, or enabling access to non-academic resources such as food or clean clothing, may all be beneficial in improving completion rates for First Nations students in regional, rural, and remote areas.

- Teachers have identified staff that there is potential for greater cultural awareness among staff, and its associated benefits on teaching in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom.

- Physical, verbal, or cyberbullying can all affect a student's engagement with schooling. This could be because they are less engaged due to higher stress, feeling that the school is not safe, or because they are missing classes. Bullies may also face risks of lowered engagement, particularly if they are forcibly removed from the school environment due to suspension or expulsion.

- 21%-23% of students with disabilities leave school before completing Year 12, compared to 8.9% of students without disability.

- Schools were noted as the most likely place for LGBTQIA+ youth to experience prejudice, and this has negative impacts on their engagement with schooling. Schools which were inclusive and perceived as safe had better outcomes for school retention and overall wellbeing.

- There may be a period of time where boarding school students need to adjust to the boarding environment.

- Boarding may present unique challenges for First Nations boarders, such as feeling disconnected from culture or Country, language barriers, or exposure to racism or lateral violence. Additionally, First Nations students may hold concerns over a loss of connection to language, culture, and county that might occur if they remain in their boarding school, which could influence decisions to leave early.

- Digital inclusion for students in regional, rural, or remote areas may be affected by the affordability of technology, the digital competency of parents or guardians, and the number of devices available in each household.

What we still need to know

There is still scope to capture student perspectives on what will make school more engaging for them, and their intentions and views about approaching and completing Year 12. In conjunction with state and territory education authorities, schools, and other peak bodies, this could provide benefits in highlighting methods or approaches that could assist with retaining students to Year 12, particularly in regional, rural, or remote Australia.

Appendix 3: Survey analysis

An online survey was distributed to all schools that were invited to participate in the research, as well as teacher's unions. Of the 49 people who began the survey, 27 provided answers to all questions.

The intent of the survey was to capture staff perspectives for those who couldn't participate in an interview or focus group. Respondents were asked about their views of retention to Year 12, strategies and approaches used at the school they are currently employed at, and what they felt is missing that could benefit student retention.

School demographic information

The majority of respondents identified that they work at government schools, with non-government schools being the least represented cohort. The majority of respondents were from Queensland (27), followed by Western Australia (18). One school from the Northern Territory responded, and 3 from Tasmania. There were no responses from schools located in the ACT, New South Wales, South Australia, or Victoria. All participants stated that their school did not offer boarding to Year 12.

Figure 9: Type of school of participants.

Q4 - Type of school
49 Responses

Catholic [39%, 19]

Government [55%, 27]

Non-government [6%, 3]
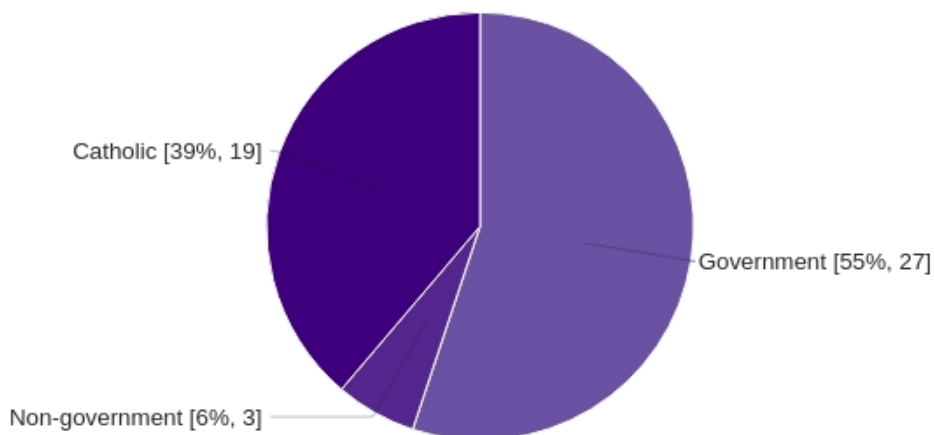
Figure 10: State/territory of participants.

Q5 - State or territory
49 Responses

- Northern Territory [2%, 1]
- Western Australia [37%, 18]
- Queensland [55%, 27]
- Tasmania [6%, 3]
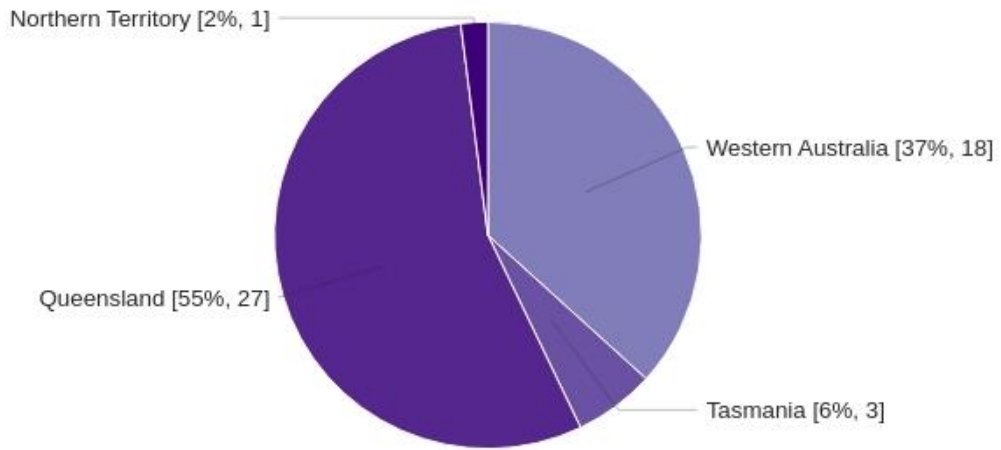
Figure 11: Number of schools offering boarding to Year 12.

Q6 - Does your school offer boarding to year 12?
43 Responses

No [43]
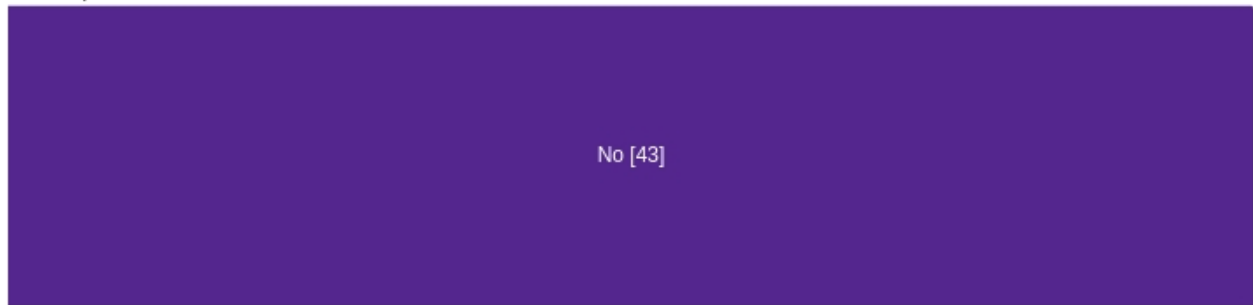
The majority of participants were at schools with between 100 and 200 students in Year 11 and Year 12. The majority of participants also identified that they had students who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, from CALD backgrounds, have a disability, or have additional needs.

Figure 12: Number of students in Year 11 and Year 12 collectively.

Q7 - Approximately how many students are currently in year 11 and 12 collectively?
43 responses
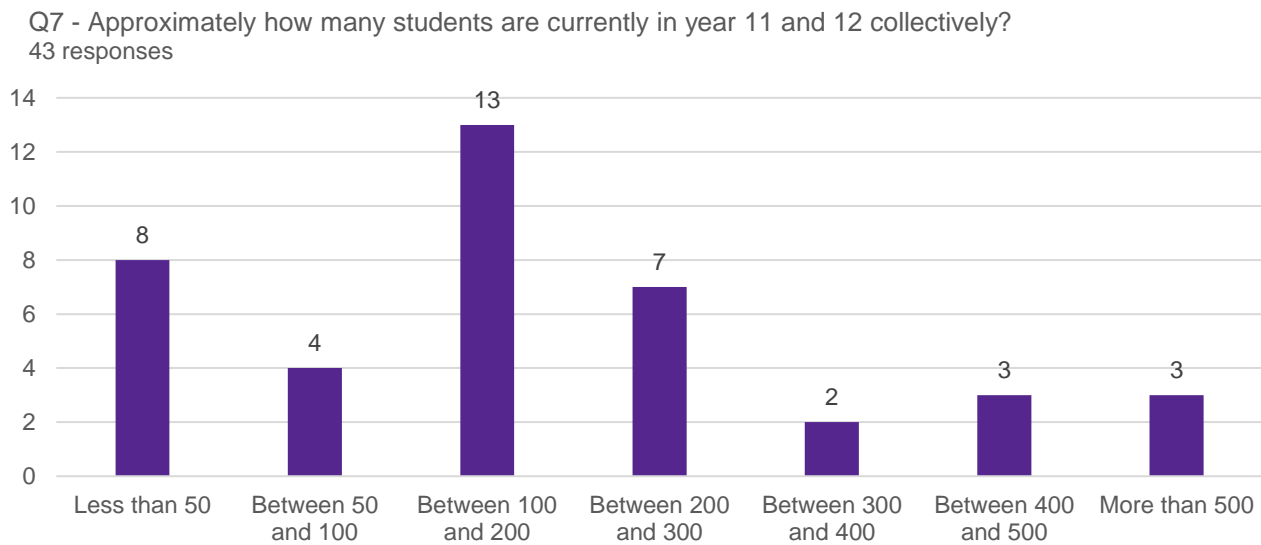
Figure 13: Year 11 and/or Year 12 students identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse, with a disability, and/or with additional needs.

Q8 - Do you currently have year 11 and/or 12 students that:
43 Responses
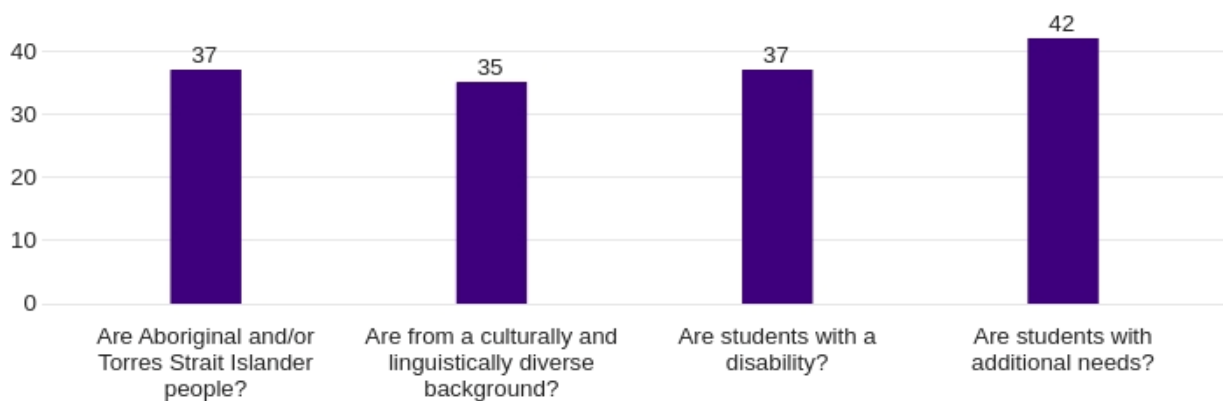
Perspectives on retention

When asked to describe student retention to completing Year 12, the majority of survey respondents responded positively. Perspectives on whether student retention has improved in the last five years were relatively cautious, with most people selecting either not at all, slightly, or somewhat.

Figure 14: Ratings of student retention.

Q9 - How would you describe student retention to completing year 12?
34 Responses

Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very good
2	9	7	14	2
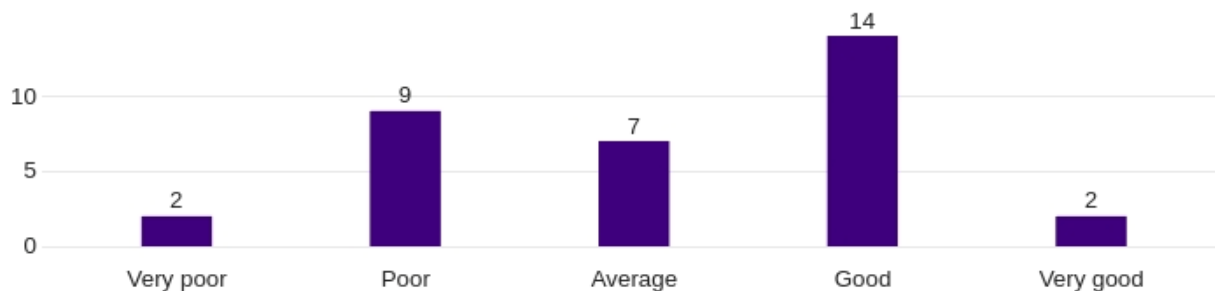
Figure 15: Improvements to student retention in the last five years.

Q31 - Thinking of the last five years, do you think student retention to completing year 12 has been improving in the school?
27 Responses

Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Mostly	A lot
10	6	6	3	2
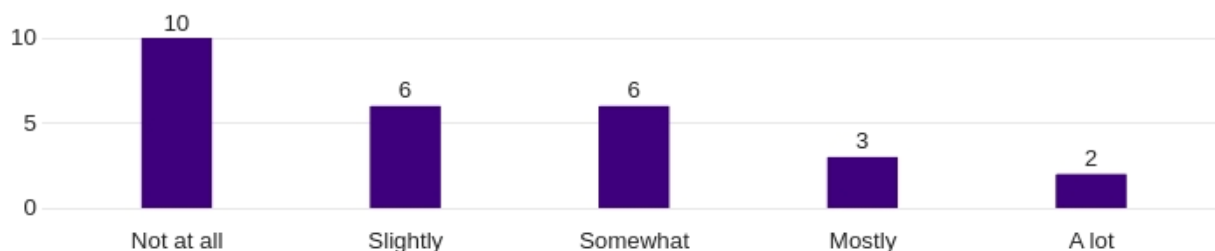
Strategies to improve retention

Most participants said that their school had strategies that supported teaching practice and leadership to support student retention to Year 12. The majority of respondents also identified that their school used specific strategies to deliver curriculum to students, to link students to post-secondary options, to support First Nations students, to support CALD students, to provide pastoral care, and to improve digital literacy and accessibility.

Figure 16: Presence of specific strategies or approaches related to teaching practice to support student retention to Year 12.

Q15 - The school has specific strategies or approaches related to teaching practice to support student retention to year 12.
27 Responses

No	Not sure	Yes
7	7	13
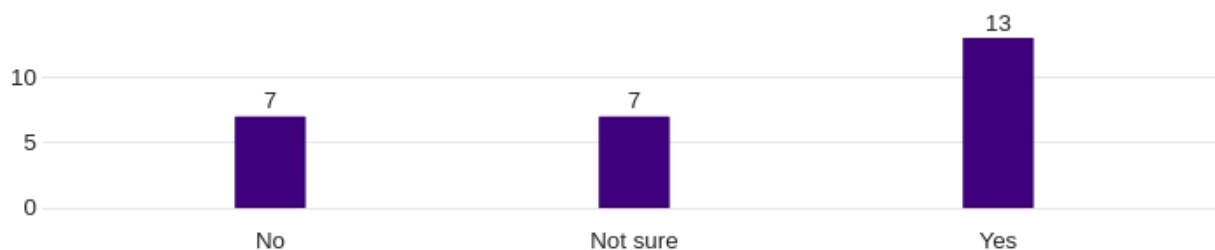
Figure 17: Presence of specific strategies or approaches to leadership to support student retention to Year 12.

Q17 - The school has specific strategies or approaches to leadership to support student retention to year 12.
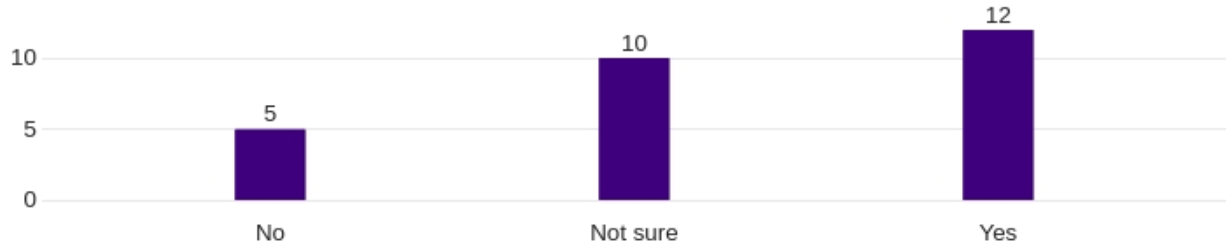27 Responses

Figure 18: Presence of specific strategies or approaches to delivering the curriculum to support students.

Q19 - The school has specific strategies or approaches to delivering the curriculum to support students.
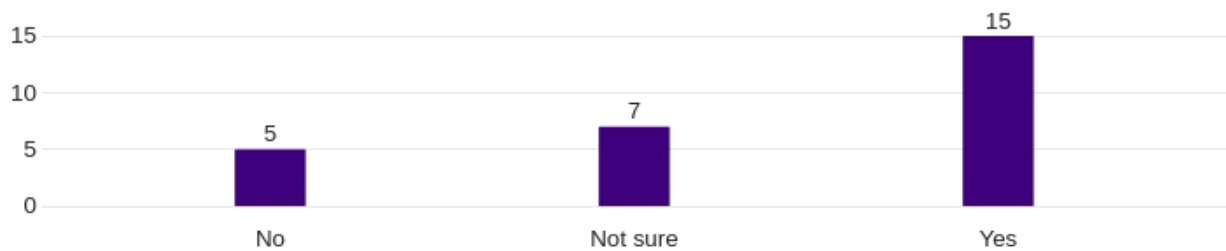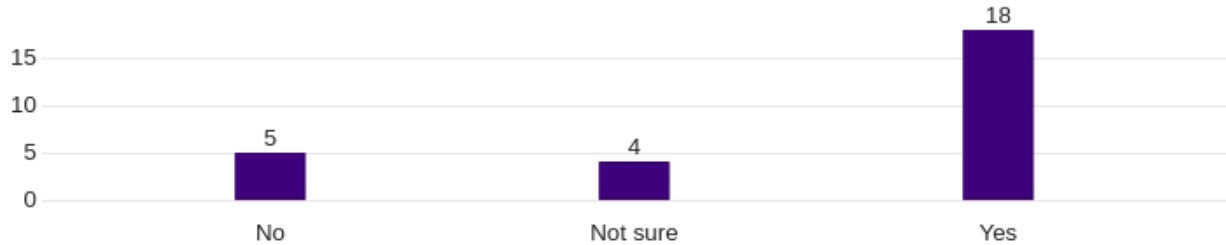27 Responses

Figure 19: Presence of specific strategies or approaches to support First Nations student retention to Year 12.

Q23 - The school has specific strategies or approaches to support First Nations student retention to Year 12.
27 Responses

Figure 20: Presence of specific strategies or approaches linked to post-secondary options to support student retention to Year 12.

Q21 - The school has specific strategies or approaches linked to post-secondary options to support student retention to year 12.

27 Responses

Figure 21: Presence of specific strategies or approaches to provide pastoral care to support student retention to Year 12.

Q27 - The school has specific strategies or approaches to provide pastoral care to support student retention to year 12.

27 Responses

Figure 22: Presence of specific strategies or approaches to support students with digital literacy and accessibility.

Q29 - The school has specific strategies or approaches to support students with digital literacy and accessibility.

27 Responses
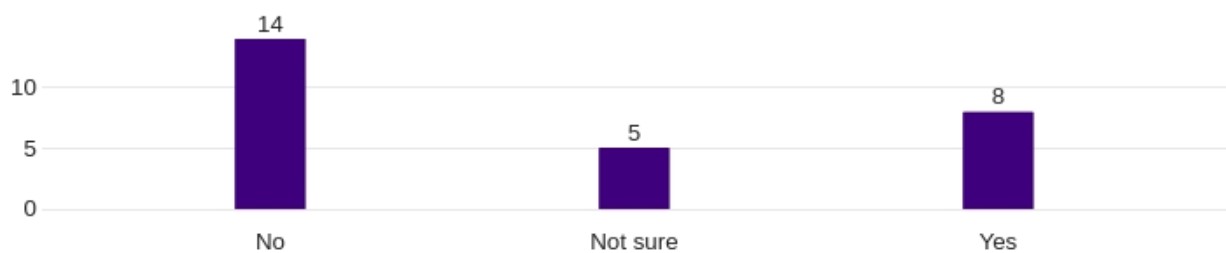
The majority of respondents identified that their school was either somewhat or very innovative in its approach to addressing challenges that might affect retention.

Figure 23: Degree of innovation at schools to address challenges to improve student retention to Year 12.

Q11 - How innovative is the school at addressing challenges to improve student retention to year 12?

34 Responses
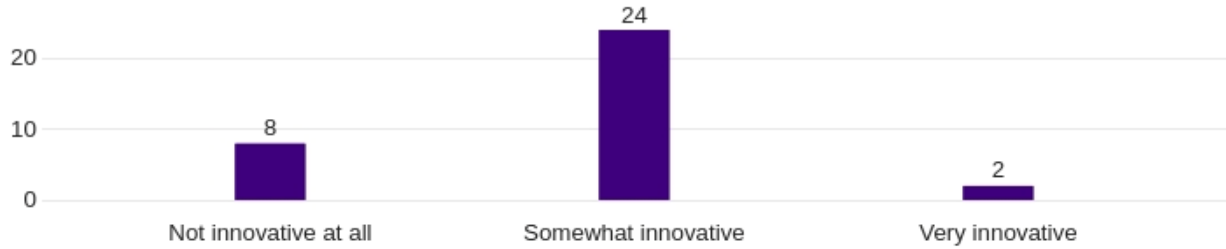
When asked to identify which strategies or approaches they believed were having the greatest impact on student retention, the top three areas were approaches linked to postsecondary options, approaches to providing pastoral care, and approaches to delivering curriculum.

Figure 24: Strategies or approaches with the greatest impact in schools.

Q32 - What strategies or approaches do you think are having the greatest impact? - Selected Choice

27 Responses

● Percentage of Choices
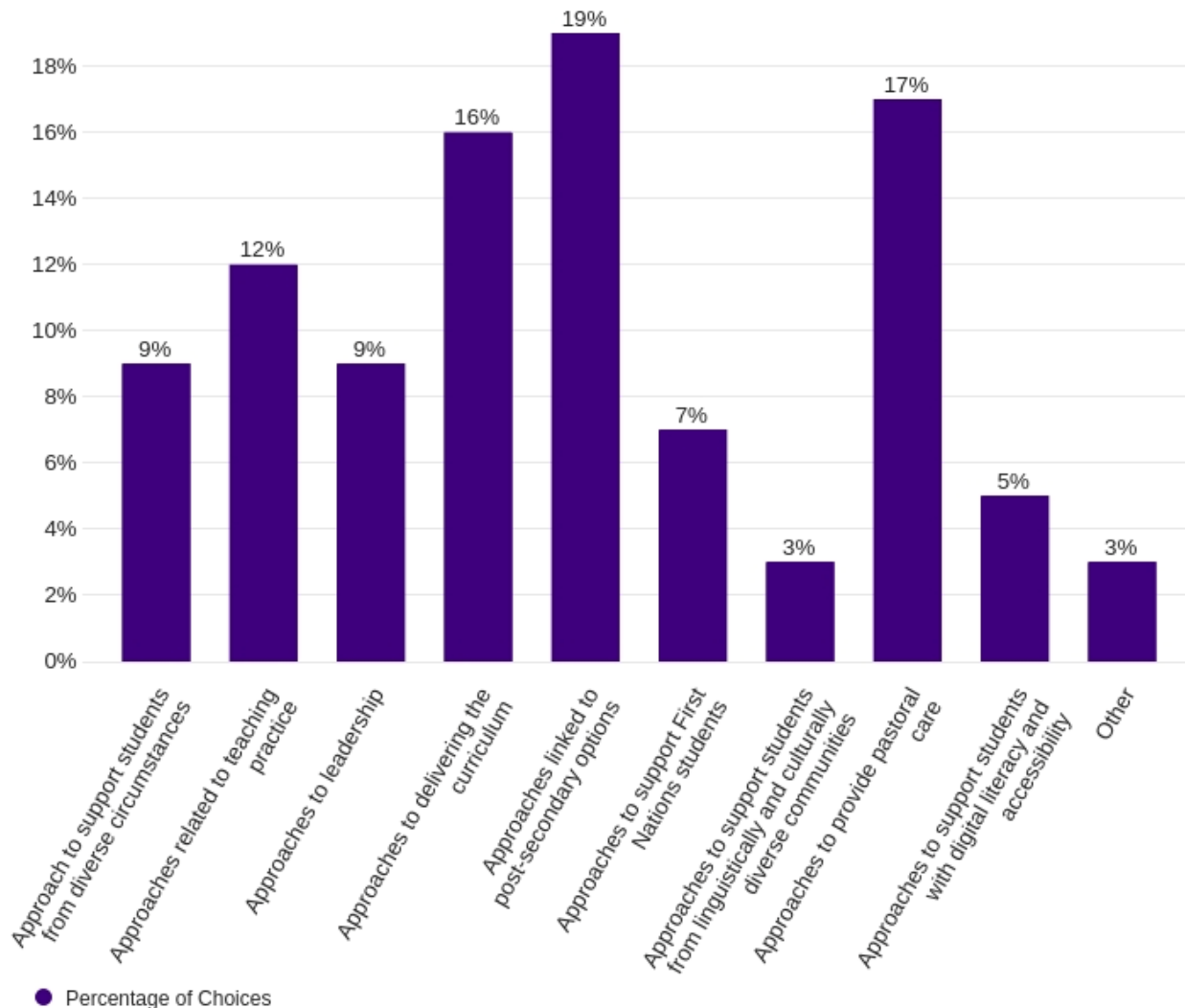
When asked what types of strategies they felt were missing, the top three areas identified were approaches that support students from diverse circumstances, approaches that support First Nations students, and approaches that support students with digital literacy and accessibility.

Figure 25: Strategies or approaches needed/missing in schools.

Q33 - Which other strategies or approaches do you think are needed/missing? - Selected Choice
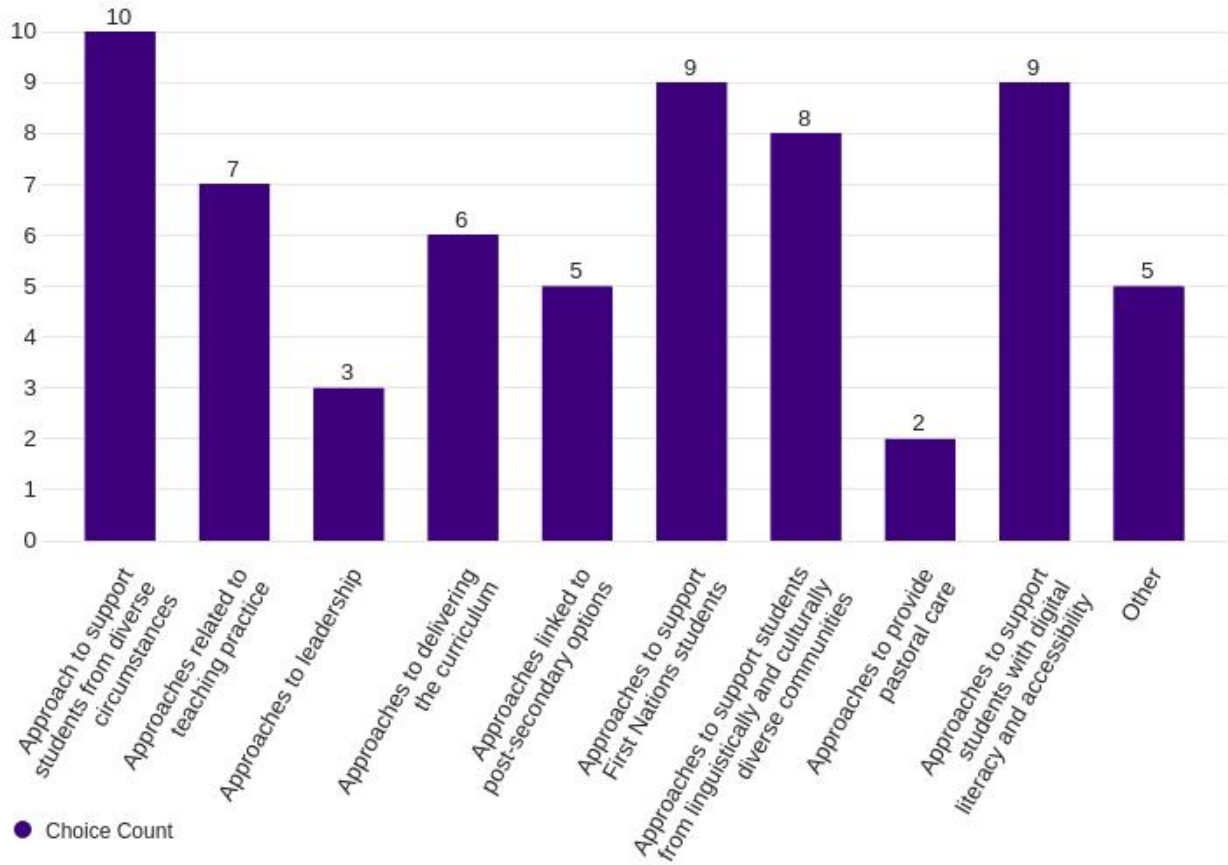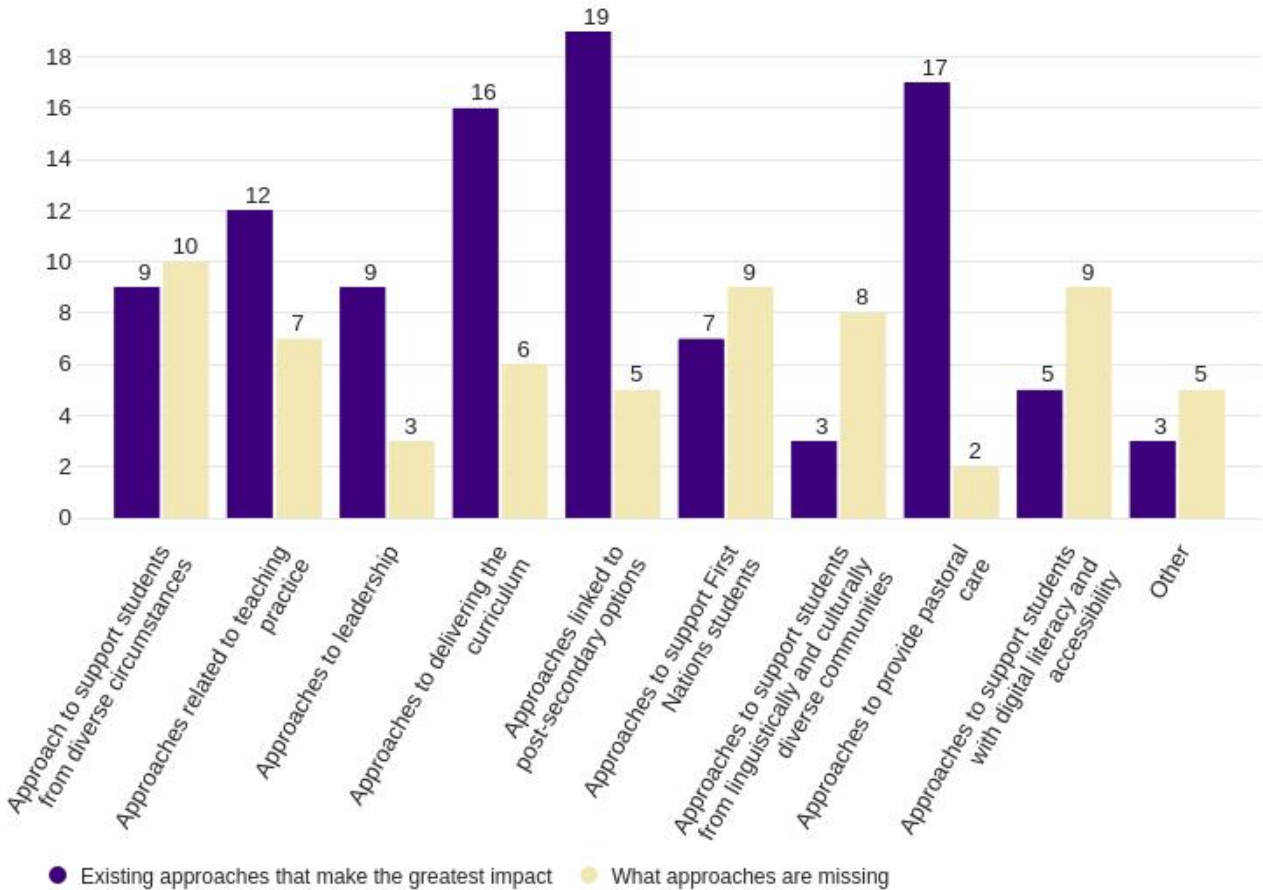
27 Responses

Figure 26: Comparison between approaches that will make the greatest impact to approaches that are missing in schools.

Approaches that will make the greatest impact (Q32) compared to approaches that are missing (Q33)
27 Responses

● Existing approaches that make the greatest impact   ● What approaches are missing

Opportunity for collaboration

Respondents were relatively split about whether their school collaborated with other schools to share strategies to improve retention. Only half of respondents responded that their school would be willing to collaborate with other schools to share innovations and improve student retention. However, a large number of respondents also answered that they were unsure about this.

Figure 27: Number of schools that collaborate with other schools about strategies and strategies to improve student retention to Year 12.

Q34 - Does your school collaborate with other schools about strategies and strategies to improve retention to year 12?
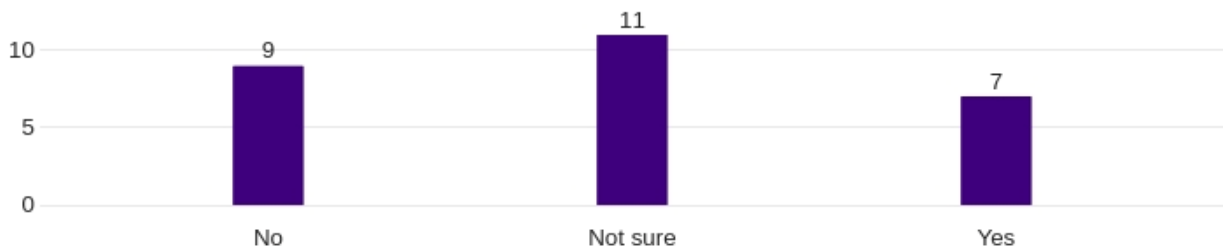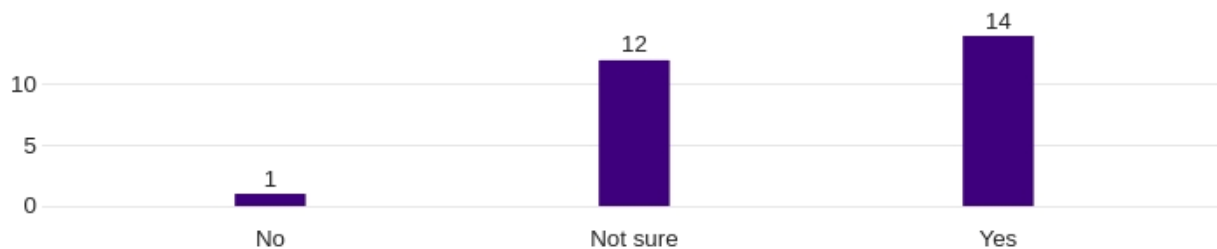27 Responses

Figure 28: Number of schools that would be willing to collaborate with other schools and share innovation to improve student retention to Year 12.

Q35 - Would your school be willing to collaborate with other schools and share innovation to improve student retention to year 12?

27 Responses

Appendix 4: Methodology

Context of the research

On 28 August 2019, the final report of the National Regional, Rural, and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Napthine Review) was released. This review highlighted a clear city-country divide in participation and attainment rates for tertiary education, with those living in regional and remote areas less than half as likely as their city counterparts to obtain a university degree by the time they are 35. The Napthine Review also highlighted that students from regional, rural, and remote areas face additional challenges in successfully transitioning to university or a vocational education and training (VET) provider and completing their studies.

Recommendation Four, Action 21 of the Napthine Review was to examine best practice in regional, rural, and remote schools to engage and retain students until Year 12. IPS was contracted by the Australian Government Department of Education to examine the extent to which strategies and approaches influence the engagement and retention of regional, rural, and remote students to Year 12, including the identification of common characteristics and consideration of unique needs of different student groups.

Scope of works

IPS will examine the extent to which strategies and approaches influence the engagement and retention of RRR students to Year 12, including the identification of common characteristics and consideration of unique needs of different student groups.

Working in collaboration with the Department, IPS will undertake consultations with key stakeholders, including state and territory education authorities, schools, peak body groups including parent peak bodies and students and other organisations that may work with the target cohort to support students complete their schooling.

Using a student-centred approach, IPS will focus on hearing and representing the views and perspectives of current school students and recent school leavers directly. This will exemplify the views of school students which are not always included in reviews commissioned by governments.

IPS will:

- Conduct a review of current literature into student retention to Year 12 in RRR areas which will include state and territory reviews, evaluations and reports, and relevant international practice that may be appropriate to the Australian context.

- Consult with current school students and recent school leavers from RRR areas. Engagements will focus on understanding their experiences, intentions and views about approaching and completing Year 12. We will also engage with those that have recently left school without completing Year 12. We understand the importance of engaging with students whose motivation to complete Year 12 may be affected by unique factors such as those with a disability, young carers, First Nations students, LGBTQIA+ students, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

- Consult with state and territory education authorities, schools, peak bodies and other key stakeholders on methods and approaches for retaining students to Year 12.

- Establish a First Nations Reference Group to ensure input into project design, analysis and use.

These activities will enable IPS to:

- Develop case studies demonstrating effective practice in engaging and retaining students in RRR areas to Year 12 considering:

- o   Teaching practice
- o   Curriculum relevance
- o   Transition from Year 10 to Year 12
- o   Visibility of post-secondary pathways, including career advice
- o   Support services offered
- o   Cultural diversity (e.g. First Nations students and other equity groups)
- o   Student wellbeing (including support services provided)
- o   Digital literacy / accessibility (Internet)
- o   Boarding schools
- o   Availability of senior subjects

- We also feel it is important to consider:
  - o   Socio-historical factors influencing student decisions
  - o   Employment prospects in their local areas and required level of education

- Conduct a brief analysis of the experiences of students who did not complete Year 12 and followed a different life/career trajectory.

- Evaluate the effectiveness of strategies and approaches, common and unique characteristics, barriers to wider adoption and proposed methods for scaling-up approaches across Australian RRR schools.

The final report for this project will set out details of student experiences and any common or unique characteristics along with an analysis and evaluation of these for engaging and retaining RRR students to Year 12. The report will draw on the review of literature and qualitative data from consultations and Australian and international examples of best practice. We will also provide a proposal for scaling-up effective methods and approaches and documenting contextual nuances across Australian schools within the report.

Ethics

HREC ethics approval was received from AIATSIS on 5 July 2023.

Research approvals were also necessary in order to approach and interview school staff and students. Applications to conduct research were submitted to every state and territory body, as well as all relevant Catholic diocese, except for in the ACT as it was not classified as regional, rural, or remote.

See Appendix 5: Received ethics and research approvals.

Procedure

Recruitment

A list of education authorities and secondary stakeholders were provided by the Department, and additional contacts were added through desktop research. These stakeholders were invited to participate between 3 to 5 times via a combination of emails and phone calls. After 5 points of contact, these stakeholders were marked as declined.

Potential schools were identified via a commercial list of schools. Schools were invited to participate via contact with principals, which was through email and phone call. Schools were contacted between 3 to 5 times and marked as declined if there was continually no response. Certain government and Catholic schools were unable to be approached for participation due to research approval for their jurisdiction not being provided before the close of the engagement period.

The staff survey was distributed to principals as part of the invitation email to schools and was provided to teacher's unions. Because the survey could be accessed by anyone who had the link to it, there is the potential that some survey respondents received the survey link from other teachers, principals, or networks not approached by IPS.

Student invitations were conducted through principals of participating schools. Principals would extend the invitation to the student's parents. Parent permission was required for student participation. There were no direct lines of contact between IPS and student participants.

Past students who did not complete Year 12 were initially planned to be invited to participate. However, there were no contact points with past students, in part because schools and organisations who worked with this demographic were unable to provide contacts for IPS to invite.

Data collection/engagement (conducted between August and November 2023)

Engagement took place between August 2023 and November 2023. Data collection took place remotely using Microsoft Teams software, telephone calls or Qualtrics surveys. The AIATSIS approved interview guide has been included below in Appendix 6: Engagement tools. All participants received an information sheet and consent forms with their invitation to participate in the research. Only interviews from participants who had completed and returned consent forms were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

IPS undertook consultations with state and territory education authorities, school staff, peak body groups students, and other organisations that may work with the target cohort to support student retention.

A total of 370 stakeholders were contacted via email for recruitment. Data collection involved a range of stakeholders and included 27 virtual one-on-one interviews, 4 virtual focus groups (with 19 stakeholders in total), 27 complete survey responses, and 22 partial survey responses. The average interview time was 45 minutes and ranged from 14 to 116 minutes. All interview types totalled 1359 minutes.

Table 5: Engagement summary

Stakeholder type	Numbers of individuals invited	Number of Individuals participated
State	156	5
Catholic	83	2
Independent	99	1
Education authority	32	17
Secondary	73	19
Current students	Indirect	2
Total	**370**	**46**

Limitations

To better guide future learnings, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations that arose during the research. Key limitations have been included below, with a discussion of the challenges and impacts that they presented and concluding with learnings for future research within the student retention space.

Limitations involving the First Nations Reference Group

Challenge

Because the First Nations Reference Group was not part of the original scope and was incorporated halfway through the project timeframe, there was significantly limited flexibility for consultation and receiving their input. Additionally, the inability to find unanimous times for subsequent meetings meant that project deadlines would often arrive without the ability to meet with the reference group beforehand.

Impact

Limited involvement of the Reference Group may hinder a nuanced understanding of the unique needs and perspectives of First Nations students, potentially impacting the cultural sensitivity of the research.

Multiple levels of approval being required

Challenge

Because of the national scope of this project, stakeholder engagement and data collection were reliant on multiple separate levels of research approvals, which conflicted with deadline requirements.

Impact

Delays in obtaining necessary approvals restricted the scope of engagement and impacted project deadlines. This was overcome initially by extending the deadline, and then prompting approval bodies for response where none was received. However, because many research approval bodies are short-staffed, approval times were generally unable to be expedited.

Limitations on student participation

Challenge

Direct access to students for participation in the research was limited, creating challenges in engaging with students and being able to promote their perspectives. Additionally, because of delays in obtaining ethics and research approvals, student engagement was limited due to the engagement period overlapping with end-of-year assessments, which made schools reluctant to pass on information about the research to students.

Impact

Reduced direct engagement with students may result in a less comprehensive understanding of their experiences and perspectives, potentially impacting the diversity and depth of insights. Additionally, this could contribute to a continuing issue where student perspectives in discussions of student retention can be limited. This was unfortunately not overcome significantly, as although two student interviews were conducted, further student engagement was not possible within the engagement timeframe.

Technological access in regional, rural, and remote schools

Challenge

Limited technological access in certain schools may restrict the number of schools actively participating in the research, due to the engagement strategy only using emails and phone calls to invite participants.

Impact

The research sample may favour schools with better technological infrastructure, potentially excluding those in more remote areas.

Western concepts of education and ways of knowing

Challenge

The research may be constrained by the dominance of Western educational frameworks and ways of knowing, potentially overlooking First Nations perspectives.

Impact

Incomplete consideration of First Nations ways of knowing may limit the cultural relevance of the research and hinder a comprehensive understanding of the educational needs of diverse student populations. To overcome this challenge, the impact on First Nations students and staff was considered for each barrier and associated strategy.

Appendix 5: Received ethics and research approvals

AIATSIS (HREC)

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Studies
Research Ethics Committee
51 Lawson Crescent, Acton, ACT 2601
GPO Box 553, Canberra ACT 2601
P 02 6246 1681 **E** ethics@aiatsis.gov.au
aiatsis.gov.au

Dr James Butterworth
IPS Management Consultants

james.butterworth@ipsau.com.au

REC Reference Number: REC-0132 Willims
Project Title: Best practice methods for retaining students in regional, rural and remote areas to Year 12

Dear Dr James Butterworth,

Thank you for submitting the above research project for ethical review. This project was considered by the AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee at its meeting held on Start.

I am pleased to advise you that the above research project meets the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007) and the *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* (2020). Ethical approval for this research project has been granted by the AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee.

Approval of this project from AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee is valid from Wednesday, 5 July 2023 to 01 Apr 2024 subject to the following conditions being met:

1. The Coordinating Principal Investigator will submit the Terms of Reference for the First Nations Reference Group and all pending Letters of Support from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community organisations and individuals who will support the Project. The Project Team are requested to not commence research activities, including participant recruitment and data collection with the designated participants, until all pending Letters of Support for that cohort have been submitted and acknowledged by the AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee.

2. The Coordinating Principal Investigator will immediately report anything that might warrant review of ethical approval of the project. The Coordinating Principal Investigator is required to submit any outstanding letters of support before research activities, including data collection, are conducted with the specific community.

3. The Coordinating Principal Investigator will notify the AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee of any event that requires a modification to the project or project documents and submit any required amendments in accordance with the instructions provided by AIATSIS. These instructions can be found at https://aiatsis.gov.au/research/ethical-research.

Catholic Education South Australia

Mr Aditya Sud
Research Team Member
IPS Management Consultants

Email: aditya.sud@ipsau.com.au

Adelaide Catholic Education Centre
116 George Street, Thebarton SA 5031
PO Box 179, Torrensville Plaza SA 5031
T +61 8 8301 6600 **F** +61 8 8301 6611
E director@cesa.catholic.edu.au
W www.cesa.catholic.edu.au

CEO ABN: 91 693 631 195
SACCS ABN: 84 572 437 441

Dear Aditya

Research Request Reference 202322 – Best Practice Methods for Retaining Students in Regional, Rural and Remote Areas to Year 12

Thank you for your email dated 19 July 2023, requesting permission to conduct research in South Australian Catholic schools.

I am pleased to advise your research proposal has been approved, subject to the following conditions:

- any items ticked **"YES"** under **"Section 8 - Sensitivities"** in the National Projects – Application to Conduct Research in Schools form, should be highlighted in the Letter to Principal
- copies of any questionnaires or surveys will be provided to the Principal
- active consent of parents and teachers/school staff, if applicable, will be obtained
- the research complies with the ethics proposal approved by the university or the research organisation's generally accepted ethics requirements
- the research complies with any provisions under the Privacy Act, that may require adherence by researchers in gathering and reporting data. It is understood that the data will not be used for any purposes other than the stated research, without the written approval of the relevant data custodians
- no comparison between schooling sectors will be made
- where students are involved, the researcher will carry out the research within view of the class teacher or authorised school observer
- opt-In consent will be sought from teachers, if applicable, parents and students
- the university or research organisation will provide copies of Public Liability and Professional Indemnity Insurance documents to the Principal
- sector requirements relating to child protection and police checks are met by **ALL** researchers:
  - o where researchers obtain information in relation to a student which suggests or indicates abuse, this information must be immediately conveyed to the Director of Catholic Education SA;
  - o all researchers and assistants, who in the course of the research interact in any way with students or student data, are required to provide evidence of an acceptable police clearance direct to the school

A copy of this approval letter is to be attached to correspondence to CESA schools and/or services, where participation in research is sought.

Catholic Education Western Australia

CATHOLIC EDUCATION
WESTERN AUSTRALIA
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION

28 July 2023

Ms Katina Law
IPS Management Consultants
Unit 1, 20 Twickenham Road
BURSWOOD WA 6100

Email: katina.law@ipsau.com.au

Dear Ms Law

BEST PRACTICE METHODS FOR RETAINING STUDENTS IN REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS TO YEAR 12; Our Ref: RP2023/24

Thank you for your completed application received July 2023 where your research will examine ways of retaining senior secondary students in non-metropolitan schools.

I give in principle support for the selected Catholic schools in Western Australia to participate in this valuable study. The research is classified as;

IMPORTANT

noting the involvement of the Australian Government through funding support.

Consistent with Catholic Education Western Australia Limited (CEWA) policy, participation in your research project will be the decision of the individual principal and staff members. A copy of this letter must be provided to the principal when requesting their participation in the research.

The conditions of CEWA approval are as follows:
1.   A final copy of the survey questions is to be provided to CEWA, if they differ from the current draft provided;
2.   A list of participating CEWA schools is to be provided, once finalised;
3.   On completion, the research findings of this study are to be forwarded to CEWA; and
4.   Where schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal students are involved, culturally appropriate research methodology must be applied consistent with your HREC approval.

CEWA notes that quality assurance is provided by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Human Research Ethics Committee - Reference Number REC-0132-Willims.

Any changes to the proposed methodology will need to be submitted for CEWA approval prior to implementation. Further enquiries may be directed to John Nelson at john.nelson@cewa.edu.au or (08) 6380 5313. I wish you all the best with your research.

Yours sincerely

Mr Wayne Bull
Acting Executive Director

Diocese of Armidale New South Wales

Catholic Schools Office *Diocese of Armidale*
Unit 2, 131 Barney Street • P.O. Box 636 • Armidale NSW 2350
Ph: (02) 6772 7388 • Fax: (02) 6772 9285 • cso@arm.catholic.edu.au
www.arm.catholic.edu.au • ABN: 90702916776

28 July, 2023

Dear Aditya,

Thank you for your application to conduct research in the schools of the Diocese of Armidale.

I am pleased to advise that approval has been granted. The approval allows you to approach the relevant school principals to seek involvement in your project. For your convenience, the contact details for secondary schools in the Armidale Diocese are:

O'Connor Catholic College, Armidale   Telephone: 6772 1666   Principal: Clare Healy
St Mary's College, Gunnedah   Telephone: 6742 2124   Principal: Bernadette Feldman
McCarthy Catholic College, Tamworth   Telephone: 6761 0800   Principal: Rod Whelan

It is the prerogative of the principal to decline your invitation to be involved in this study, or to withdraw from involvement at any time. The privacy of the school and that of any school personnel or students involved in your study must, of course, be preserved at all times. When your research has been completed, please forward a summary report of the findings and/or recommendations to me and the school/s involved, as soon as practicable after results are to hand.

A copy of this letter must be provided to principals when seeking their involvement in this study.

I wish you well in this undertaking.

Sincerely,

Vicki Hartley

Head of Projects
Professional Officer to the Director of Schools
Catholic Schools Office
Armidale

Diocese of Bathurst

27 September 2023

Aditya Sud
Research Team Leader
IPS Research, Policy and Evaluation

Via email: aditya.sud@ipsau.com.au

Dear Miss Sud,

Thank you for your application to conduct research within the Diocese of Bathurst. I understand you would like to contact schools within the Diocese of Bathurst in order to conduct the study titled "Effective Practice in Engaging and Retaining Regional, Rural and Remote Students to Year 12". Approval for this study is hereby given, conditional on the basis that all participants from the Catholic Education Diocese of Bathurst must be able to withdraw from the study at any time, during or after the research process.

All secondary schools within the Diocese of Bathurst are nominated for this study.

As we have already received your completed forms, we will now notify the schools and advise the Principals of our preliminary approval. You now have permission to approach the Principals of the schools. As you no doubt appreciate, it is the prerogative of any Principal whom you might approach to decline your invitation to be involved in this study or to withdraw from involvement at any time.

The privacy of the school and that of any school personnel or students involved in your study must, of course, be preserved at all times and comply with requirements under the Commonwealth Privacy Amendment (Private Sector) Act 2000.

It is a condition of approval that when your research has been completed you will forward a summary report of the findings and/or recommendations to this office as soon as practicable after results are to hand.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at this office if there is any further information you require. I wish you well in this undertaking and look forward to learning about your findings.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs Christina Trimble
Executive Director of Schools

Gilmour Street Kelso NSW 2795 | PO Box 308 Bathurst NSW 2795 | T: 02 6338 3000 | F: 02 6338 3001
2/148 Brisbane Street Dubbo NSW 2830 | PO Box 4208 Dubbo NSW 2830 | T: 02 6882 7355 | F: 6882 9337
Email: ceo@bth.catholic.edu.au | ABN: 73 470 086 952 | www.bth.catholic.edu.au

IPS Management Consultants   93

Northern Territory Department of Education

Aditya Sud

From:	Researchapps DET <ResearchApps.DET@education.nt.gov.au>
Sent:	Monday, 11 September 2023 11:33 AM
To:	Aditya Sud; James Butterworth; Serena McClellan
Cc:	Jaxom McCreadie-Roe
Subject:	RE: Research Application: 23126 Best practice into retResearchapps DET <ResearchApps.DET@education.nt.gov.au>aining students in rural, regional and remote areas to year 12

Dear Serena,

I am pleased to advise your application to conduct the research "Best practice into retaining students in rural, regional and remote areas to year 12"- reference 23126 has been **supported** by the Department of Education (the department).

Please note that the decision to participate in this project will be at the discretion of the relevant school principal, staff, parents, and individuals. You are required to provide a copy of this email confirmation to the school principal. Once school consent is obtained, a list of participating schools must be emailed to ResearchApps.DET@education.nt.gov.au.

I advise that it is mandatory for people who have contact or potential contact with children in certain areas of employment to hold a Working with Children Clearance Notice. Please ensure you satisfy this requirement as per the NT Police, Safe NT website.

This confirmation of support is valid for six months after the report submission date indicated in your application of June 2024.   If your research is delayed, or is to be conducted past this date, please contact the department regarding an extension and/or amendment.

The department is interested in the findings from your research and, as such, requests all final reports, proposed media and/or publications be provided to the department for review 30 days prior to publication.

If you require any further assistance, you may contact the department on telephone (08) 8999 3554 or via email ResearchApps.DET@education.nt.gov.au.

Yours sincerely,
Daniel Masters
Executive Director
Strategic Policy, Projects and Performance
Department of Education
Northern Territory Government
Level 14, Mitchell Centre, 55-59 Mitchell Street, Darwin
GPO Box 4821, Darwin, NT 0801, Australia
w: www.education.nt.gov.au

1

Queensland Department of Education (State Schools)

20 October 2023

Ms Katina Law
IPS Management Consultants
Unit 1, 20 Twickenham Road,
BURSWOOD, PERTH, WA 6100
Email: katina.law@ipsau.com.au

Dear Ms Law

Thank you for your research application *Best practice methods for retaining students in regional, rural and remote areas to year 12*, seeking permission to conduct research in Queensland state schools (Ref. 550/27/2745). I wish to advise that your application has been supported.

This letter gives you permission to approach the principals of the schools nominated in your application to seek their final approval for the research to be administered at their school. It also provides permission to approach the Director-General, of the Department of Education to seek his approval to participate in the project.

Please provide principals and the Director-General with a copy of the attached letter that contains important information to inform their decision about whether they wish to participate in this research project. Your permission to approach schools is conditional upon the provision of this letter to each of the principals you have nominated.

As detailed in the Department of Education's *Guidelines for Conducting Research*, https://education.qld.gov.au/about/Documents/research-guidelines.pdf, the following conditions apply to your research:

- You must obtain consent from each principal of the schools nominated in your application before you can commence your research or invite research participants to participate in the project.
- Principals have the right to decline participation if they consider the research will cause undue disruption to educational programs in their schools.
- Principals have the right to monitor any research activities conducted in their facilities and can withdraw their support at any time.
- The Director-General, Department of Education, has the right to decline participation in this research project.

This permission to approach schools and the Director-General has been granted on the basis of the information you have provided in your research application and supporting documents. Permission to approach is subject to the conditions detailed below:

- Compliance with relevant directives on the Queensland Health website.
- Adherence to the department's *Terms and Conditions for Conducting Research*, https://education.qld.gov.au/about/Documents/terms_conditions.pdf.
- Protecting and promoting a human rights culture in the conduct of research that is consistent with the objectives of the *Human Rights Act 2019* (Qld).
- Any changes to the project required by your institution's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) must be submitted to the department for consideration before you proceed with the research. Conversely, any changes required by the department must be submitted to your institution's HREC for consideration and approval before commencing the research.

Education House
30 Mary Street Brisbane 4000
PO Box 15033 City East
Queensland 4002 Australia
Telephone (07) 303 45929
Website www.qed.qld.gov.au
ABN 76 337 613 647

Diocese of Townsville

TOWNSVILLE CATHOLIC EDUCATION
ROMAN CATHOLIC TRUST CORPORATION FOR THE DIOCESE OF TOWNSVILLE

PO BOX 861, AITKENVALE QLD 4814 | 2 GARDENIA AVENUE, KIRWAN QLD 4817
www.tsv.catholic.edu.au | 07 4773 0900 | enquiries@tsv.catholic.edu.au

29 August 2023

Jaxom McCreadie-Roe
IPS Management Consultants
Unit 1, 20 Twickenham Road
PERTH WA 6100

via email: jaxom.mccreadie-roe@ipsau.com.au

Dear Jaxom

Research Application Reference Number: 2023-09
Research Application Title: Best practice methods for retaining students in rural, regional and remote areas to year 12.

Our Research Approval Team has recently reviewed the above application to conduct research. Upon their recommendation, I am happy to give permission for you to contact secondary schools in the Townsville Diocese to discuss participation in your research program.

Yours sincerely

Jacqui Francis
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Appendix 6: Engagement tools

The following question sets were submitted to AIATSIS for ethics approval and were approved for use. These questions guided all stakeholder engagements.

Introductory statements

In accordance with ethical guidelines, all participants were read the following introductory statement before commencing with engagements.

First some background – IPS has been engaged by the Australian Government Department of Education to research best practice methods for retaining students in regional, rural, and remote areas to year 12. We would like to explore what is happening in your school and understand the main challenges faced by students that impact on them completing year 12 and the strategies the school is using to improve retention rates. We would also like your perspective of what is missing, or what more could be done to improve retention to year 12 – at your school and more broadly.

This interview will be recorded for transcription purposes. All data will be deidentified and responses will be amalgamated so anything you share with us today will be anonymous.

We may indicate the school's state or territory in our report to highlight any key themes relevant to informing best practice. In a moment I will start the recording and ask for your consent to proceed, do you have any questions before we start the interview?

Introductory statements for past students

For past students, the following introductory statement was read prior to engagements.

First some background – IPS is doing some research for the Australian Government Department of Education to understand what works well for encouraging students in regional, rural, and remote areas to stay in school until year 12.

We would like to understand more about your reasons for leaving school before year 12. If you were thinking about staying to finish year 12, we would like to know what the school could have done differently to help or encourage you to stay. We are especially interested in knowing what kind of support the school could have provided to you.

This interview will be recorded and then transcribed (put into a written document). Your responses will be combined with other student data and we won't record your name against what you tell us so anything you share with us today will be anonymous. Your answers will not be shared with the school, your teachers or parents/carers.

I'd like to remind you that you don't have to answer any questions that you don't want to answer and if you want to stop the interview you can – just tell me and we will stop.

State and territory education authorities

1. Thinking of schools in the state/territory's regional, rural, and remote areas, how would you describe student retention to completing year 12?

2. To what extent has this been trending over the last five years (improving / getting worse)

3. What factors do you see affect student retention?

4. What are schools doing to address those factors?

5. What is the authority doing to address those factors?

I have a list of factors that may affect student retention to year 12 and would like to know what strategies or approaches schools, or the authority, are using to improve retention in relation to those factors. Any specific examples and measures you can share would be highly informative (critical question – get specific examples and measure of success for each one). The first one is…

6. Social factors (socioeconomic / disability / young carer)

7. Cultural factors (First Nations, CALD)

8. Teaching practice

9. Leadership

10. Access/distance travelled/lack of transport options

11. Curriculum

12. Post-secondary options in local areas

13. Support services available (what's missing?) including career advice

14. Student wellbeing (Pastoral care)

15. Digital literacy / accessibility – internet quality

16. Availability of senior subject options (and whether it is face-to-face or online)

17. To what extent are those measures working overall?

18. Are there other strategies or approaches schools are using?

19. To what extent do schools collaborate and share strategies or ideas or share access to subjects and/or specialist teachers to improve retention to year 12? How does your state/territory facilitate this?

20. What else could be or needs to be done to improve retention to year 12 in RRR schools in the state/territory?

21. Other comments

RRR schools (Principals / school staff)

1. Please give me a brief overview of the school

2. How would you describe student retention to completing year 12?

3. To what extent has this been trending over the last five years (improving / getting worse)

4. What factors impact on student retention? (probe for comprehensive answer)

5. What is the school doing to address those factors?

6. What, if any, state/territory initiatives are addressing these factors?

I have a list of factors that may impact student retention to year 12 and would like to know what, if any, strategies or approaches the school is using in relation to the factors. Any specific examples and measures you can share would be highly informative (CRITICAL QUESTION – get specific examples and measures for each one). The first one is…

7. Social factors (socioeconomic / disability / young carer etc.)

8. Cultural factors (First Nations, CALD)

9. Teaching practice (probe for use of small-group tuition)

10. Leadership

11. Access or distance travelled and availability of transport options

12. Curriculum

13. Post-secondary options in local areas

14. Support services available – in local area / within the school (what's missing?)

15. Student wellbeing (Pastoral care)

16. Digital literacy / accessibility – internet quality

17. Availability of senior subject options

18. To what extent are those measures working?

19. Having gone through that list, what other strategies or approaches is the school using?

20. To what extent does the school collaborate with other schools in regional, rural, or remote locations to share strategies or ideas to improve retention to year 12? (Probe any blockers)

21. In general, what else could be or needs to be done to improve retention to year 12 in RRR schools?

22. Would you be happy for us to write up a deidentified case study about examples of good practice in student retention at your school that you have spoken about?

23. Other comments

Other relevant organisations and peak bodies

1. Please give me a brief overview of your organisation and its relationship with RRR school communities.

2. Considering the RRR school communities you work with, how would you describe student retention to completing year 12?

3. To what extent has this been trending over the last five years (improving / getting worse)?

4. How have you formed this view?

5. What are the main challenges schools face to retain students?

6. What innovative practices or programs make a positive impact on student retention?

7. To what extent are you aware that schools collaborate with other schools in regional, rural, or remote locations to share strategies or ideas to improve retention to year 12?

8. In general, what else could be done differently to improve retention to year 12 in RRR schools?

9. Other comments

Current students

10. Are you looking forward to graduating year 12? (opportunity to determine whether they are likely to stay or thinking of leaving)

11. What are your plans when you finish school (open, warm up discussion to see if they have goals and explore the extent to which completion of year 12 is needed)

12. How did you find the transition from year 10 to year 11? (Interviewer note: only ask if year 11 or 12)

13. Did you get to choose your subjects?

    a. (If yes) Were the subjects you wanted to do available? (if not, what was offered to enable student to study those subjects)
    b. (If yes) Were the subjects you wanted to do delivered in a way that suited you? (Face to face/remote)

14. How are your teachers? (probe for more than 'good' type of responses – what makes them good or not good – probe the extent to which teachers link to retention)

15. Do they give you the support you need for school? (Probe what they do well)

16. What could the teachers do better?

17. Do you participate in small-group tuition?

    a. If yes – how beneficial is it for you?
    b. If no – would you like to be able to participate in small-group tuition?
    c. If yes – why?

18. What does the school do to support you (probe support for – social / emotional / education / cultural / personal needs including disability – what do they do well)?

19. What could the school do better to support you and your studies?

20. What could the school or teachers do to help you enjoy school?

21. Any other comments?

Past students

1. Tell me what have you been doing since you left school? (Warm up and probe for working / study / other – drill down on why they didn't go onto further study if relevant)

2. When did you leave school? (how long ago, what year 10 /11/ 12, what point in school year)

3. Tell me about your last year at school (probe for decision to leave – who made that decision)

4. Why did you decide to leave school? (probe as appropriate and consider all these factors – social / emotional / education – support and subjects available / cultural / personal needs including disability)?

5. Is there anything that your teachers or the school could have done to support you to stay to finish year 12? (probe support for – social / emotional / education / cultural / personal needs including disability)?

6. What else should schools do to help or encourage students to stay to the end of year 12?

7. Any other comments?

RRR schools online survey

Introduction

IPS has been engaged by the Australian Government Department of Education to research best practice methods for retaining students in regional, rural, and remote areas to year 12.

We are surveying schools in regional, rural, and remote areas to learn what, if any, strategies and approaches are used by schools to support students to completing year 12.

Please provide as much detail as you can in open text responses. There is also an opportunity to provide your contact details if you would like to be considered for an interview for the project.

Please click continue if you consent to participating in the survey. By proceeding with this survey, you are providing us with your consent to use the information that you provide for this research, including within a report that may be published. Your information will be kept confidential and you will not be able to be identified from the information you provide. You may change your mind about participating at any point while completing the survey, however, once you click 'submit' we will be unable to withdraw your information from this study.

If you have any questions or concerns about this survey, please contact:

- IPS Management Consultants Co-CEO Katina Law on 0418 194 887

- The Australian Government Department of Education [Alexandra Mattinson, Director | (02) 6240 8605 alexandra.mattinson@education.gov.au

8. Please select the option that best represents your school (drop box)
- Metropolitan or major city / Inner or outer regional / Remote or very remote (filter)
- Primary only / Primary and secondary to year 10 / Primary and secondary to year 12 / Secondary to year 10 / Secondary to year 12 (filter)
- Government / Non-government / Catholic
- ACT / QLD / NT / WA / SA / VIC / NSW / Tas

9. Does your school offer boarding to year 12?
- Yes
- No

10. Approximately, how many students are currently in year 11 and 12 collectively?

11. Do you currently have year 11 and/or 12 students that:
-
- Are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people?
- Are from a culturally and linguistically diverse background?
- Are students with a disability?
- Are students with additional needs?

12. How would you describe student retention to completing year 12?

- Very poor
- Poor
- Average
- Good
- Very good

Please explain your answer

13. How innovative is the school at addressing challenges to improve student retention to year 12?

- Not innovative at all
- Somewhat innovative
- Very innovative

Please respond to each statement and, where relevant, a brief overview of any strategies or approaches used and their impact.

14. The school has specific strategies or approaches to support students from diverse circumstances (e.g. socioeconomic status, being a young carer, parent education or employment situation)

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

If yes – what are those strategies or approaches?

15. The school has specific strategies or approaches related to teaching practice to support student retention to year 12

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

If yes – what are those strategies or approaches?

16. The school has specific strategies or approaches to leadership to support student retention to year 12

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

If yes – what are those strategies or approaches?

17. The school has specific strategies or approaches to delivering the curriculum to support students

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

If yes – what are those strategies or approaches?

18. The school has specific strategies or approaches linked to post-secondary options to support student retention to year 12

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

If yes – what are those strategies or approaches?

19. The school has specific strategies or approaches to support First Nations student retention to Year 12

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

If yes – what are those strategies or approaches?

20. The school has specific strategies or approaches to support students from linguistically and culturally diverse communities

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

If yes – what are those strategies or approaches?

21. The school has specific strategies or approaches to provide pastoral care to support student retention to year 12

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

If yes – what are those strategies or approaches?

22. The school has specific strategies or approaches to support students with digital literacy and accessibility

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

If yes – what are those strategies or approaches?

23. Thinking of the last five years, do you think student retention to completing year 12 has been improving in the school?

- Not at all
- Slightly
- Somewhat
- Mostly
- A lot

24. What strategies or approaches do you think are having the greatest impact? (list strategies/approaches above and 'other' (open text) – can select more than one)

25. Which other strategies or approaches do you think are needed/missing? (List strategies/approaches above and 'other' (open text) – can select more than one)

-

26. Does your school collaborate with other schools about strategies and strategies to improve retention to year 12?

-
- Yes
- Not sure
- No

27. Would your school be willing to collaborate with other schools and share innovation to improve student retention to year 12?

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

28. Thinking of best practice – what strategies, support or programs can be done at the school level to improve retention and completion of year 12? (open text)

29. Other comments

-

If you are interested in participating in a 30 minute online/phone interview, please provide your email address and we will follow up promptly.

Thank you for your time!

Appendix 7: References

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