RESEARCH PROJECT ON THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT ON IMPROVED STUDENT LEARNING

Glenroy College case study

September 2015

Acknowledgements

This research project was developed by Glenroy College following strong support from a range of government and community agencies including:

- Family-School Community Partnerships Bureau
- Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network (INLLEN)
- City of Moreland
- Salvation Army Crossroads
- Arabic Welfare
- Headspace
- Northern Youth Connections
- Primary schools in the Glenroy area

We would like to take this opportunity to thank these organisations for their support and assistance throughout the project.

We would also like to acknowledge the work of the Engagement Project Officer, Student Welfare Team, students and families during the past two years.

For further information on this project please contact the Principal of Glenroy College on (03) 93040400 or contact the college at www.glenroycollege.vic.edu.au/

Executive Summary

The purpose of this research project was to study the impact that the work of the Engagement Project Officer had on:

- Student attendance
- Student achievement in Reading and Numeracy
- Family engagement
- Partnerships with community agencies

The focus question of the project was:

How can we strengthen partnerships with families to improve student learning outcomes?

A literature review was conducted with the evidence strongly supporting the key contentions that underpinned the research study:

1. Family engagement is extremely important in ensuring successful educational outcomes for students.

2. Student disengagement from school is the cumulative result of many factors that reach back a considerable distance into a student's life and that predictive factors can emerge very early on in primary school and even before.

3. Many challenges faced by individual students and their families need professional intervention.

4. Attendance, academic achievement especially in English and Mathematics and relationships with family, peers and teachers are strong predictors of student disengagement.

The research project studied destination, attendance and Reading and Numeracy data for 47 students who worked with the Engagement Project Officer (EPO) during a two year period. Two cohorts of students were identified, a long term cohort which included five Year 9 students who worked with the EPO over a two year period and a short term cohort of ten students (nine Year 9 and one Year 11) who worked with the EPO over a one year period.

Case studies and the data identified the complex issues faced by many students and their families and clearly demonstrated that the EPO had a significant positive impact on outcomes for individual students.

The report identifies the following aspects of the EPO's work as being instrumental in leading to the improved student outcomes:

- The one to one counselling provided to students
- Being a regular point of contact to assist students with 'disconnection' issues.
- Teachers being better informed about students' needs
- Students being linked with appropriate intervention
- Improved communication between school and home
- Families having a point of contact within the school who they trusted and could communicate with

- Families feeling more positive about the college and therefore providing positive messages to their children about education
- Families feeling supported either by the school or community agencies which reduced the stress and dysfunction in some homes
- Strong relationships with community agencies and improved service delivery coordination resulting in targeted and consistent support for families.

The report also outlines success factors and challenges of the project.

Recommendations outlined in the report at the school, system and government level highlight the importance of:

School level:
- The EPO having the appropriate experience and qualifications and being solely dedicated to providing support to individual students and their families
- The role of the Student Welfare team
- Appropriate support being provided to families that face significant issues impacting on their child's engagement with education
- Strategies being developed and implemented to strengthen partnerships with families in order to ensure successful outcomes for all students
- A coordinated approach with community agencies to address the significant issues faced by many students and their families
- The School Community Action Team (SCAT) as an effective strategy to promote collaboration and coordinate services
- Tracking students attendance, achievement outcomes and transition data in providing appropriate support to students
- The Family-School Partnerships Framework in helping schools to enhance family engagement
- A strong relationship between the secondary college and its feeder primary schools.

System level:
- Schools and community agencies within a network/region taking collective responsibility for students
- Tracking student data in identifying the needs of students and their families and coordinating appropriate support
- Improving the data tracking systems as currently they are inadequate making the interrogation of data difficult and unhelpful
- Data at the network and regional level being better coordinated and informative
- A strong commitment at the system level to improving family engagement
- Organisations such as the Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN), local government and community agencies in supporting schools to develop strategies to strengthen family engagement.

Government level:
- Additional funding to assist schools to employ appropriately qualified staff to work with disengaged students and their families
- Recognising that student disengagement is often a combination of a range of factors which often includes significant family issues that need to be addressed in a coordinated manner

- Stronger relationships between primary and secondary schools in identifying students 'at risk' of disengagement as early as possible
- Recognising that often student disengagement is evident in primary school and that early intervention is crucial in addressing the contributing issues as soon as possible
- Recognising that successful outcomes for all students is a community responsibility and that support for strong relationships between schools and community agencies is paramount
- Further work to develop innovative and effective strategies to improve family engagement
- Recognising that success for different students can be measured in a variety of ways.

School context

Glenroy College is a relatively small co-educational school located approximately 18 kilometres north of Melbourne with an enrolment of 473 students in 2015. Enrolments have steadily increased over the past few years.

The college has a diverse school population with over forty nationalities represented with a high proportion of students coming from an English as an Additional Language background. In recent years there has been an increase in the number of students with refugee status. The college also has a significant number of students receiving support through the Program for Students with Disabilities. Based on the Student Family Occupation index the college is considered to have a low socio-economic profile.

Glenroy College values its diversity and has a strong belief that all its students can achieve to a high standard. The college has a clear focus on improving student's literacy and numeracy skills through consistent teaching and learning practices. The college has a strong belief that literacy and numeracy standards are crucial in ensuring students are well placed to achieve success in the Later Years and transition successfully into further education and employment pathways. The College has a commitment to building strong relationships with the local and wider community, be it schools (primary and secondary), business and industry, tertiary education institutions or community agencies. The college understands the importance of working closely with families in ensuring successful outcomes for all students and has been involved in a number of initiatives in recent years to strengthen family engagement.

Glenroy College offers a well-planned and comprehensive curriculum based on AusVELS. It offers a wide curriculum in years 7 and 8, an opportunity to explore in year 9 and access to vocational and academic pathways in years 10, 11 and 12. Both the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) are offered at Years 11 and 12.

Focus question

The focus question identified in the research project action plan is:

How can we strengthen partnerships with families to improve student learning outcomes?

Introduction

Glenroy College over a period of time had significant concerns about the number of students 'at risk' of disengaging from education and the impact that this would have on their future learning and capacity to complete Year 12.

In 2010 the college was an active member of the Moreland Youth Commitment which was auspiced by the Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network (INLLEN). Through this involvement the college became involved in initiatives aimed at reducing the number of students disengaging from education, improving Year 6 to Year 7 transition and building stronger relationships with families.

In 2011 the Moreland Under 16 Project was commissioned by Northern Youth Connections and the INLLEN to research the level of disengagement from school, education and training of young people under 16 years of age in the City of Moreland. Following this project, a pilot program was established that involved the employment of a Youth Worker to work specifically with students identified 'at risk' of disengagement from school and their families. Originally funded through Youth Connections for five months as a contract position the role is now funded by the college and is ongoing.

This research project is a study of the impact this initiative has had on student achievement over a two year period.

Attendance data was used to identify students 'at risk' of disengagement from school. Generally students with attendance of less than 80% were identified as suitable to work with the Engagement Project Officer. Less than 80% attendance meant that students were absent at least one day a week. The majority of students identified were in Year 7.

Most students identified had a range of social, emotional and academic issues. Often the families were dealing with major challenges such as financial difficulty, alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence and/or mental health issues. In many cases the pattern of poor attendance existed at primary school.

The Engagement Project Officer is a qualified Youth Worker who has had significant experience in working with young people and their families. The foci of the project was to provide support for individual students, identify and address issues impacting on students' engagement at school, work closely with families to build their connection with the school and their child's education and link families with community services when appropriate.

During the period of this case study the Engagement Project Officer:
- Provided one on one counselling support to students
- Built strong relationships with students and their families
- Gained an understanding of the issues impacting on each student's education
- Liaised with a wide range of community agencies
- Referred students and families to appropriate support services
- Communicated regularly with students and their families
- Worked with teachers, welfare staff and the careers coordinator to identify appropriate pathways for students
- Worked with staff to develop their understanding of the issues impacting on 'at risk' students and their families and improve the communication between home and school.

A range of data was collected to measure the impact that the Engagement Project Officer had specifically on student achievement but also on attendance and transition outcomes.

Evidence base

This case study identifies and describes the impact the work of the Engagement Project Officer has had on building strong relationships with families and improving outcomes for individual students.

This research project was strongly informed by previous work done on student disengagement. This included:

1. A literature review prepared for the Victorian Department of Human Services and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in April 2008 by Stephen Lamb and Nicky Dulfer from Melbourne University on 'Predicting disengagement and its effects: What evidence is there on the extent to which disengagement can be predicted at younger ages? (8-12)'. In their literature review Lamb and Dulfer identify that "research strongly suggests that disengagement from school is the cumulative result of many factors that reach back a considerable distance into a student's life – predictive factors can emerge very early on in primary school and even before."

Lamb and Dulfer contend that the literature indicates that disengagement can be predicted to a high degree of accuracy in the younger years. They identify a range of predictive factors that have a high level of accuracy which includes school attendance, and poor achievement (particularly in Maths and English).

The literature review highlighted the importance of a range of student predictors of disengagement. This included:
- Personal attributes such as lack of personal motivation (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morrison 2006), low self-esteem (Audas & Willms, 2001; Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards & Zyngier, 2004; Russell, Ainley & Frydenberg, 2005; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) and lower levels of self-rated academic ability (Murray et al.,2004)
- Family culture with students likely to become disengaged having one or more of the following: low parental involvement with their school (Bridgeland et al., 2006), large family size (Murray et al., 2004), family dysfunction (Lamb et al., 2004; Murray et al., 2004), family break-up and/or re-formation; being a single parent family or a step family (Murray et al., 2004; Rumberger, 2007; Willms, 2003), high family mobility – transience (Murray et al., 2004) and spending three or more hours alone after school per day (Rumberger, 2007).
- Health issues (their own or that of a family member) including physical illness (Russell et al., 2005), mental illness (Lamb et al., 2004; Murray et al., 2004), and a learning disability (Murray et al., 2004).

The literature review also identified school predictors of disengagement which included:
- Absences – frequent/chronic non –attendance (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Murray et al., 2004; Neild & Balfanz, 2006) and truancy (Audas & Willms, 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986; Willms, 2003)
- Participation and sense of belonging with one aspect identified being the number of times students change schools (Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000)
- Academic achievement and its role in students' sense of wellbeing in school and their level of motivation and desire (Willms, 2003; Lamb, 2004;). The literature

highlighted that students in primary school are significantly more likely to disengage if they are falling behind in English and Maths (Neild & Balfanz, 2006), not keeping up with school work (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Butler et al., 2005; Rotermund, 2007), displaying a history of low achievement (Audas & Willms, 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Butler et al., 2005; Lamb et al., 2004) and having difficulties with literacy and numeracy (Butler et al., 2005; Lamb et al., 2004; Murray et al., 2004; Rumberger, 2007; Willms, 2003).

- Relationships with family, peers and teachers including too much freedom (Bridgeland et al., 2006), poor communication with parents (Bridgeland et al., 2006), limited behavioural regulation by parents (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), being bullied (Butler et al., 2005; Rumberger, 1995), not feeling they fit in or belong at their school (Audas & Willms, 2001; Butler et al., 2005; Willms, 2003), a dislike of the teacher by the student (Rotermund, 2007) and ongoing conflict between the student and the teacher (Butler et al., 2005).

Included in the literature review is a table identifying the factors involved in student disengagement and the estimated strength of their impact. Of the 36 factors identified in the table it is estimated that the work of the Engagement Project Officer would have direct influence on at least 25, most of which being classified as having medium to high impact.

2. The Moreland Under 16 Project that was commissioned in 2011 by the Inner Northern Youth Connections program and Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network (INLLEN) to:
- identify how many young people under 16 years of age in the City of Moreland were disengaged from school, education and training
- assess what form of support was available to these young people
- develop recommendations for a strategy to help re-engage them.

The following is the summary of the findings of the Project.

Many young people under the age of 16 in the City of Moreland attend school on an irregular basis. Government schools reported 87 young people on average missing from school at least 20% of the time, and another 47 missing from school at least 40% of the time.

There is a smaller and almost invisible group of young people in the 10-15 age group who are not attending school, few of whom interact with government or community agencies unless they get into trouble with police or come to the attention of services such as Child Protection. Local agencies in Moreland identified only 16 young people who were known to be not attending school.

Interviews with those working with local families and interviews undertaken for this project with parents and young people suggest that there are considerably more young people not going to school, especially when it is clear that there are often multiple instances of young people not attending in the one family.

Many of the 10-15 year olds disengaged from school have no contact with youth agencies or other support systems. Only 16 were reported by Moreland agencies for 2011. When re-

engagement with education does occur, it is frequently the result of word of mouth peer referrals to programs such as the Youth Media Training Studio or to the Pavilion school.

One of the factors that make it extremely difficult to establish the extent of school non-attendance for this age group is that Government agencies will not release data citing privacy legislative requirements. Since data is not shared even between government agencies, the effect is to keep the extent of school disengagement hidden from public view. The focus of Government data collection on school disengagement commences at 15 years of age, when the evidence is that some young people have not been going to school for several years by that time.

Based on the available data and interviews, the majority of those disengaged from school appear to be in the 14-15 year old age group, but there are some cases in which disengagement has occurred by 11 or 12 years of age. This is consistent with Victoria Police and Juvenile Justice data that also indicates that most contact occurs from age 14, and particularly age 15.

More effective integrated tracking mechanisms from primary school and beyond would assist in more accurately quantifying how many people under 16 are not attending school. It appears that school disengagement may be an even greater issue in the Hume LGA (as many young people from Hume are being assisted by Moreland alternative education and youth support services). (Kellock, 2011)

An outcome of the Moreland Under 16 project was the establishment of a pilot program at Glenroy College in 2012 to build stronger relationships with families of students identified as 'at risk' of disengagement from school.

Indicators of success

Over the period of the research project the Engagement Project Officer worked with 47 students and their families. Due to a range of issues including the high mobility of many of the families and difficulties in collecting data due to student's inconsistent attendance two cohorts of students were identified to form the basis of this report. The long term cohort includes five Year 9 students who worked with the Engagement Project Officer for at least two years and the short term cohort includes nine Year 8 students who worked with the Engagement Project Officer for only one year.

Overall Cohort

The overall cohort includes 47 students. Most students were in Year 7 when they first started working with the Engagement Project Officer. The current enrolment status of these 47 students is shown in Figure 1.

Current Enolment Status of the 47 students who worked with Family Engagement Officer as at the May 2015
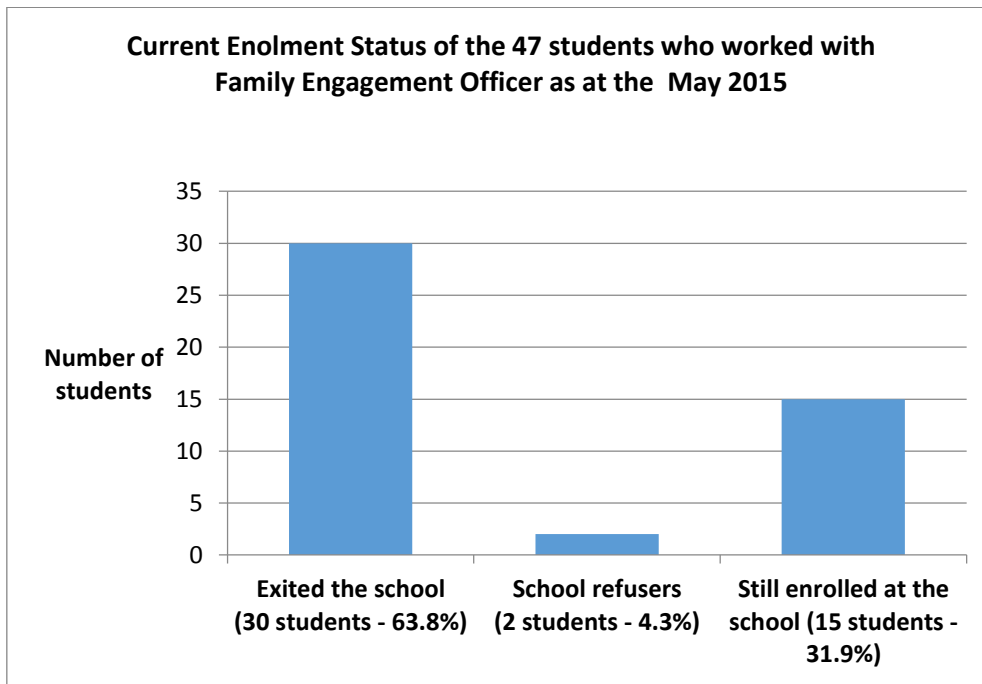
Figure 1

Of the 47 students only 15 remain enrolled at the college. Figure 2 shows the destination data for the 30 students who have exited the college.

Destination data for the 30 students who exited the college as of the May 2015
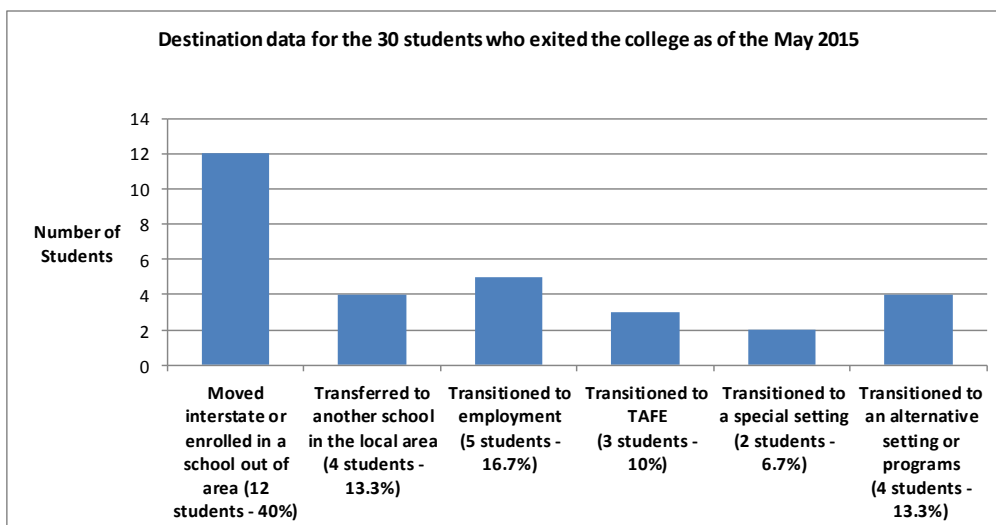
Figure 2

Of the 30 students who exited, 12 students or 40% moved interstate or out of area. This indicates the high mobility of these students and their families. Twenty five students or 83.3% are still engaged with education with the remaining students transitioning to employment.

This data highlights the challenge in working with many of these students and their families. The high mobility means that contact with support services and the school is often fragmented and disjointed. It also emphasises the importance of the role of the Engagement Project Officer who was instrumental in supporting students and their families through the transition process.

Long term cohort

The long term cohort showed significant improvement in reading, numeracy and attendance over a two year period.
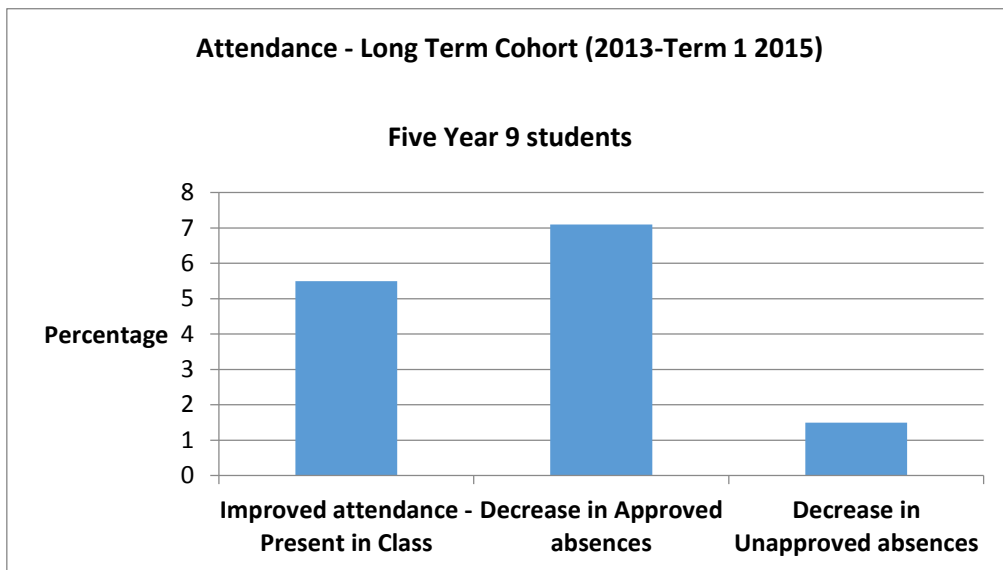

Figure 3

Figure 3 shows that the cohort improved their attendance in class and decreased in both measures of absenteeism, particularly approved absences. Although this is pleasing the overall attendance rate was still only 76.8%.
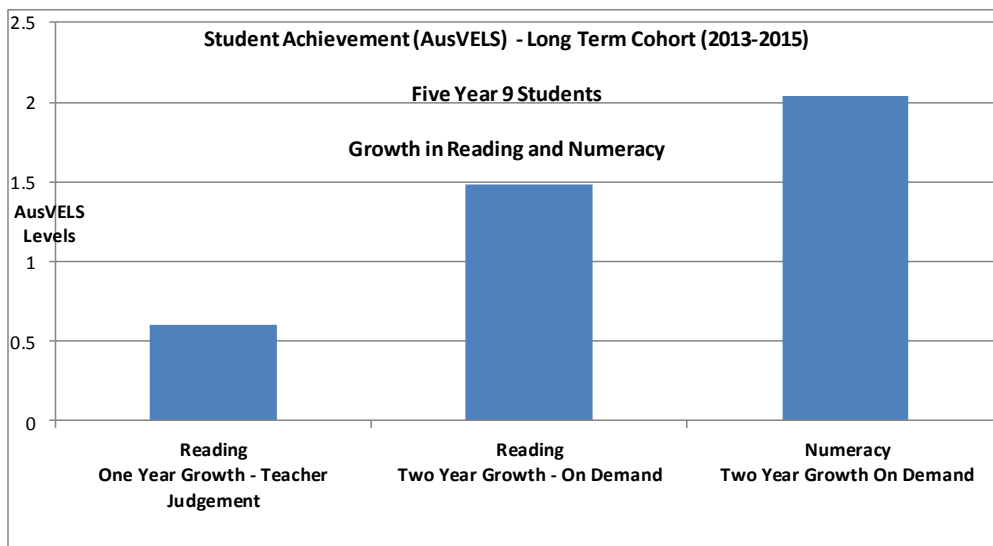

Figure 4

Figure 4 shows the pleasing improvement in student achievement in Reading and Numeracy.
Although the expected one year growth of one AusVELS level or two AusVELS levels over two years was not achieved in Reading a growth of 0.6 (one year growth based on Teacher Judgement) and 1.48 (two year growth based on On Demand testing) was pleasing

considering the complex issues faced by many of the students. Two students achieved significantly above the expected growth, one similar and two significantly below.

The Numeracy data is particularly pleasing with the two year growth of 2.04 achieving the expected growth. One student achieved significantly above the expected growth, three students were similar and one significantly below.

The overall growth results of course need to be treated with caution due to the small cohort numbers.

Short Term Cohort

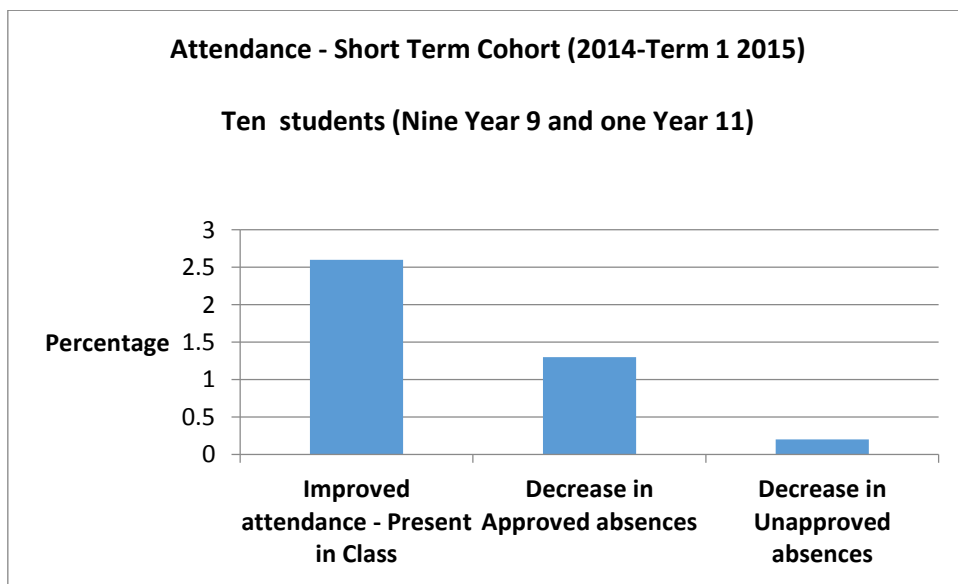The Short Term Cohort showed improvement in all three areas, but particularly in Reading.

Figure 5

Figure 5 shows there was a 2.6% improvement in 'Present in Class' over a 15 month period. The overall attendance rate however still remained disappointingly low at 79%.
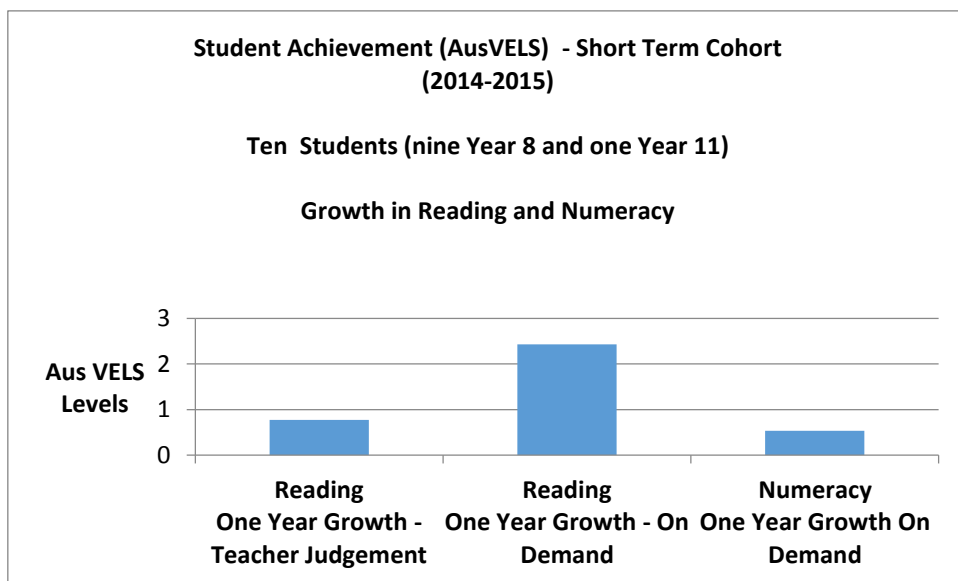

Figure 6

The one year growth for On Demand Reading (2.43) was exceptional however it was not supported by the Teacher Judgement result (0.77). Nevertheless the results do indicate that this cohort of students made significant growth in Reading during the time they worked with the Engagement Project Officer.

On Demand Reading data indicates that of the 10 students in the cohort, 8 students achieved a growth of 1.0 or greater AusVELS levels over the 12 month period. Teacher Judgement data indicates that only 4 students achieved this.

On Demand Numeracy data indicated a growth of only 0.53 which is significantly below the expected growth. Three students achieve a growth of 1.0 AusVELS level or greater over the 12 month period.

Overall the data for both cohorts was pleasing. Considering that traditionally data for students 'at risk' of disengaging from education would be expected to decrease over time the fact that all parameters measured indicated improvement highlights the importance and impact of the assistance provided by the Engagement Project Officer.

Case studies

The following case studies illustrate the work of the Engagement Project Officer, the impact they had on individual students and their families and the complexity of the challenges faced by many students.

Case study 1 - Student: A

Age: *14 years old*   ***Gender:*** *Male*   ***Year Level 2015:*** *Year 9*

Date student/family started working with Engagement Project Officer: *11/02/13*

Case closed with ongoing support

Referred to school nurse this year (but recently assisted the nurse in a successful mediation involving student A and other students in his class who were bullying him).

Presenting Issues:

The Engagement Project Officer (EPO) met Student A one day in the school sick bay. He was presenting with stomach aches and had been absent from school for a couple of weeks and the EPO felt there were other reasons preventing him from wanting to attend school. Student A had attended two primary schools and had struggled making friends. He had an anxiety attack in the EPO's office where she went through some breathing techniques to calm him down. Student A displayed severe attachment issues and didn't want to be separated from his mother and maternal grandmother and felt disconnected from his father. Student A seemed to put unrealistic expectations on himself as he wanted to finish his homework and read every night but was involved in activities such as Jujitsu and Irish dancing most nights after school.

The EPO made a home visit on 13/2/13 and met with Student A's mother and father. They had conflicting views about parenting Student A with the father adamant that Student A

should be playing 'boys' sports such as football and soccer and not doing dancing. The father believed these sports would promote friendship circles for Student A which he doesn't seem to have. The mother felt that Student A loved dancing and had been doing it since he was a child. Student A said he enjoys dancing and likes that his mother likes it. The mother felt that the father doesn't connect with his son as they don't spend any time playing or talking together and believes anytime the father talks to Student A it is to tell him to be quiet as he wants to sleep as he wakes up early for work.

Student A was experiencing bullying by his peers in his class and the EPO worked with him, staff and parents to ensure he had strategies to deal with some of the verbal comments being made. Mediations were conducted by the EPO which resulted in consequences being given to the students who were bullying him.

Work with Student A and his family:

The EPO's goal was to meet regularly with the family to determine what the needs were. The EPO discovered that Student A was becoming more anxious which was triggered by arguments at home, being bullied or him perceiving he was being bullied in class. Student A would come to see the EPO every recess and lunch time to help work through the breathing techniques. This occurred for a lengthy period until the EPO developed a very good rapport with both the student and his family. The EPO was able to make a referral to Headspace to work through Student A's issues. He attended every session and had many meetings with the clinician who reported his progress. Towards the end of these sessions, the family went through a difficult time as the mother and father separated which resulted in the mother taking the children and not allowing access to the father. The EPO worked with the mother to ensure she contacted the Family Law Court which resulted in the case going to court. As a result, the father gained access with the children on the weekends. Student A's behaviour escalated again and his Headspace sessions increased. These helped him through the difficult separation. Student A was able to be honest about the way he was feeling and acknowledged he didn't want to do Jujitsu and wanted to try playing squash. The mother followed through and enrolled him.

The EPO referred Student A to do the TRACKS program which works with young people around family issues through fun and adventure activities. He attended a camp with them. The reasons for the referral was to ensure Student A could feel comfortable when separated from his family, particularly his mother, and have an opportunity to socialise with young people his own age. The EPO attended his graduation where he was presented with a certificate of completion and showed footage of his time on the program. The EPO observed that Student A had grown from the experience and was more comfortable being separated from his family as he initially wanted to go home after only one night at camp. He is now a mentor for other students and attended another camp.

The EPO used an eclectic approach with Student A and his family and focussed on the attachment theory as Student A was so attached to his mother. The EPO was able to provide Student A with experiences such as TRACKS that would allow him to experience being away from her and the family. Student A subsequently has made great connections with other

young people and has been supported by a fellow year 10 student at the school, who also worked with the EPO. This student became Student A's mentor.

Outcome/s:

The EPO worked with the family for 3 years and was successful in engaging both the mother, father and the student. This was instrumental in ensuring Student A stayed engaged with his education. The family was referred to family support services through Merri Community Health which resulted in the family being referred to specialist services such as Headspace. Student A's attendance has remained above 90%.

The EPO referred Student A to see the school nurse at the start of this year but has also worked with him through issues when the nurse has been absent. The EPO assisted Student A by providing a mediation between him and some boys in his class. This resulted in the boys apologising and not engaging in any further bullying behaviour during the past few months. The EPO has explained to the mother that the school nurse is the now the worker. This has been difficult as the mother felt comfortable with the EPO and was open in discussing issues at home. The mother is now comfortable in calling the school nurse.

<u>Case study 2 -</u> Student: B

Age: *14 years old*   **Gender:** *Male*   **Year Level 2015:** *Year 9*

Date student/family started working with Engagement Project Officer: *17/08/12*

Case Closed/Open: *Open*

Presenting Issues:

The Engagement Project Officer (EPO) made a home visit to meet the mother on 17/08/12 as she was unable to come to the school because she had a young baby. The mother spoke openly about the family issues stating she had mental health problems and was taking anti-depressant medication as she suffers with depression/anxiety. Student B had attendance issues where he didn't like going to school and had had this issue in primary school. Student B was 2 months old when his father and mother split up which was due to severe physical and verbal abuse towards the mother and Student B. Student B was seeing a psychologist from North West at primary school to address these issues. The mother was linked in with support from Uniting Care to assist with her family issues.

The EPO met with Student B at school on the same day (17/08/12). He was very reluctant to meet with her, with his response being, "What's the point in talking as nothing happens with anyone I have spoken to." Student B said he was very angry towards his father, wished his father wasn't angry all the time and that he loved him. The EPO identified that Student B needed support in dealing with his anger especially towards his four siblings and continued therapy to deal with not being able to see or change the way his father is.

Work with Student B and his family:

The EPO's goal was to meet with Student B weekly to develop a rapport with him as he struggled with other staff members and was constantly being relocated from class and suspended. The EPO's aim was to engage him in school and connect with the mother to

ensure she had supports in place. The strategies used were Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) to break down the issues he had with teachers, as he was often in trouble for being inappropriate in class, making offensive comments which teachers took exception to and being very loud and rude to his peers. There were many times the EPO needed to be solution focussed as decisions needed to be made about changing his behaviour quickly in order for him not to be continually relocated. The EPO was aware that attachment theory needed to be explored as he had felt abandoned by his father and an experienced worker he had at primary school left him once he moved to secondary school.

The EPO was effective in establishing a very good rapport with Student B and his mother. Student B started to use the strategy of 'stop and think' and often came to see the EPO before a situation in class or the yard would escalate. This allowed the EPO and Student B to work through the issue and explore how to proceed. This prevented in many circumstances Student B being relocated and/or suspended. The EPO found that the mother would rely on her by calling her for guidance on what support she could attain. This resulted in referrals to Child First; Anglicare Family Support and St Vincent Care where the family could access food as they were struggling financially. Student B's attendance increased over the time the EPO worked with him and last year received an attendance award for attending for over 90% of the time.

The EPO made it a priority to have regular phone contact with the mother and ensured that she came to the school to have meetings to discuss Student B's schooling. Due to Student B's low literacy/numeracy, the Principal and EPO met with him, his mother and his older sister at the end of 2013 to discuss him benefiting from repeating year 8. After numerous discussions and meetings Student B agreed with the option of him going into year 9 if he improved. As a result, Student B went into year 9 in term 2 and is in year 9 this year.

The EPO made a DHS notification at the end of January, 2015 due to his mother not returning from a trip to Lebanon and being concerned about the welfare of Student B and his siblings. The EPO assisted with linking the family with St Vincent Care to get ongoing weekly food hampers and worked with the DHS worker to support the family and keep them together until the mother returned. The EPO also organised a cognitive mental health assessment as she was concerned about the level of understanding Student B had in following through with instructions. The EPO's research indicated that there was quite an extensive psychological file that had not been passed onto the secondary school where Student B had been tested at age 5 (Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals) at his primary school. He was scored at 76, just above 70, the eligibility for funding support. He was re-tested at 9 years old and scored the same which indicated significant issues in understanding/comprehension. He was re tested again this year and the psychologist felt he needed a further speech pathology assessment which indicated he had mild language difficulties.

The EPO met with all Student B's teachers and highlighted the strategies needed in working with him which included modifying work to help him complete set tasks. Student B was referred to the TRACKS program which is run by Merri Community Health and the Police. This involved Student B working with other young people which he loves. This addressed some of Student B's risk factors and will assist him to attend camps which focus on team building etc.

Student B continually came to see the EPO to discuss issues and also to thank her for supporting him. He was able to go to the year 9 camp after the EPO organised for CSEF funding as the mother was unable to afford it.

Outcome/s:

The EPO has been successful in engaging with both the mother and Student B which has resulted in the family being referred to specialist services, which ultimately resulted in the family staying together and Student B still being engaged in secondary school. The EPO believes Student B could have been lost in the system due to the multiple issues that he faced including his language disorder and low cognitive skills, and that given the right support he will continue to complete his education.

Case study 3 - Student: C

Age: *14 years old*   ***Gender:*** *Female*   ***Year Level 2015:*** *Year 9*

Date student/family started working with Engagement Project Officer: *17/08/12*

Case Closed/Open: *Open*

Presenting Issues:

The Engagement Project Officer (EPO) initially met with Student C and her mother due to her attendance being low. Attendance according to the mother had been an issue in primary school as Student C disliked following rules, getting organised with her books and wearing school uniform.

Student C highlighted she hated the school as they (teachers) treated her like her brother who was previously expelled from the school. Student C was smoking cigarettes and spending time with friends who the mother labelled bad influences on her.

Student C lives in a neighbouring suburb which means that she needs to use the bus and train to get to the school. She often missed the train or didn't travel due to not having money for a Myki card.

Work with Student C and the family:

The EPO's goals were to meet with Student C weekly to develop a rapport with her as she had no connection with any other staff member in the school and to try and keep her engaged with school by improving her attendance. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) was used to; break down the issues Student C had with teachers especially around wearing the right uniform, build rapport to try and gain her trust and that of her family who found the system challenging, establish consistent routines and follow up on the issues that were impacting on her, establish and maintain boundaries as she was at the EPO's office door on all of the 3 days that she worked. One of the major initial issues was the financial difficulties faced by the family which meant they couldn't provide Student C with a school uniform. The school helped provide her with a uniform however she consistently didn't wear the correct school shoes.

Initially the EPO made it a priority to have regular phone contact with Student C's mother as her father hadn't previously engaged with the school. The mother suffered mental health issues and was diagnosed with depression and anxiety for which she took medication. Over time the EPO was able to engage with the father who became connected to the school by attending appointments with the EPO, Level Co-ordinator and Principal when Student C was involved in incidents such as fighting, smoking at school, disregarding teachers by swearing at them, simply not following the school rules and constantly being late or out of school uniform.

As time went on Student C became involved in risk taking behaviours which included smoking marijuana and running away from home for days or weeks. Her safety became a concern.

Outcome/s:

The EPO made a DHS notification due to physical assault by Student C's brother and father last year and was able to get her referred to Youth Projects to see an Alcohol and Other Drugs Worker to address her increased marijuana use. Appointments were made weekly at the school and the family were also engaged as the drug use extended to home.

Student C is currently on a supervision order to home for 9 months with the family being referred to Families First which will work holistically with them. Student C's attendance has been sporadic however she has still managed to attend weekly over the past 3 years. The EPO believes this to be successful engagement as Student C has been provided with both the support and assistance required to ensure her safety and continued link with education.

Student C is repeating Year 9 this year and made a decision last year that when she turns 15 in April she will go to TAFE to do the Next Steps program. The EPO will assist in transitioning her into this program to ensure she doesn't lose connection with the education system.

Student C recently successfully transited to the Gateway Project administered by Roxburgh College. This was supported by the EPO.

In particular, the following aspects of the Engagement Project Officer's work were instrumental in leading to improved outcomes for students:
- the one to one counselling provided helped students to address many of the issues impacting on their engagement with school promptly and proactively
- having a regular point of contact assisted students with the 'disconnection' issues often resulting from irregular attendance
- teachers were better informed about students' needs, both learning and personal allowing for improved teaching and the development of stronger relationships
- better understanding of students' learning needs meant they were linked with appropriate intervention strategies (four students were enrolled in the Learning Assistance Program-LAP)
- improved communication between school and home
- families had a point of contact within the school who they trusted and could communicate with
- families felt more positive about the college and therefore provided positive messages to their children about education

- families felt supported either by the school or community agencies reducing the stress and dysfunction in some homes
- strong relationships with community agencies and improved service delivery coordination meant that support to families was targeted and consistent.

Unintended outcomes

The work of the Engagement Project Officer with individual students and their families resulted in a number of unintended outcomes. These included:

- Stronger links with feeder primary schools. The Engagement Project Officer worked closely with the primary school teachers and welfare staff to gain a better understanding of the students and their families. This resulted in the sharing of strategies and early identification of other students who may be coming to the secondary college in the future. As the primary schools became more aware of the work being done by the Engagement Project Officer there was genuine interest in trying to expand her work further.
- The work impacting on students in the primary schools. Many of the students had siblings in primary school. Often these primary school students were having the same engagement issues being experienced by their older brother or sister. The work done with the family therefore also had a positive impact on these other school age children.
- Stronger links with community agencies and a more coordinated approach to supporting families. Many of the students and their families had complex issues that required professional assistance. The Engagement Project Officer being a trained Youth Worker and having worked at Anglicare was able to work with the family to identify the appropriate support that was needed and facilitate the contact with community agency.
- Supporting students and their families through the transition to another school, alternative educational setting or employment pathway. Many parents/care givers historically had a poor relationship with their school throughout their own education. The transition to another educational setting could therefore be a challenge. The Engagement Project Officer supported families through this process by ensuring they were aware of the process to follow, contacting key people on behalf of the family and ensuring the new setting was briefed about the learning needs of the student. Quite a few families moved schools a number of times after leaving Glenroy College however they continued to contact the Engagement Project Officer for assistance for each new move.
- One parent electing to return to education. Through working with the Engagement Project Officer the parent felt that she had gained the confidence and desire to return to study.
- Improved pathway support for students. The Engagement Project Officer worked closely with the Careers Coordinator, Level Leaders and/the Principal Class to identify appropriate pathways for individual students. The Engagement Project Officer supported the student and their family through, ensuring they were fully informed about the choices available, liaising with key contact people, attending meetings and visits with the student and assisting with completing any paperwork.

- Helping students and their families to apply for assistance. In one particular case a student transitioned into a TAFE course. The Engagement Project Officer investigated opportunities for the student to receive financial assistance. The Engagement Project Officer then assisted the student and their family to successfully apply for an assistance grant. The feedback from the TAFE after six months indicated that the student was attending regularly and working extremely well.
- A strong interest in the project from other schools. A number of presentations about the project were made at various forums. Following these presentations the college received numerous enquiries about how to establish similar opportunities in their school.

Evaluation and monitoring

Throughout the period of the research project a range of evidence has been collected to measure the impact that the Engagement Project Officer has had on student outcomes and family engagement. Evidence has included:

- Student attendance data
- On Demand English and Mathematics data
- NAPLAN data
- Teacher judgement data
- Other student data such as South Australian Spelling Test, Successmaker, TORCH and Burt

Although all these data sets were used in this study, a few were not particularly informative due to inconsistencies in the data collection i.e. some students having incomplete records due to their poor attendance. Student Attendance data, On Demand English and Mathematics data and Teacher Judgements proved to be the reliable sources.

Success factors

The key factors that contributed to the success of the project were:
- The experience and expertise of the person in the role. The fact that the Engagement Project Officer was a trained Youth Worker and had a wide range of experience in working with young people and their families was critical. This ensured that the person had the skills and knowledge required to have a real impact with the student and their family, knew what community services were available and how to access them, had the respect and confidence of community agency workers, was aware of the risk factors associated with the role i.e. home visits, knew how to run a case management model and could work closely with the college student welfare team.
- The Engagement Project Officer not being a teacher was important. Many families were more willing and confident to engage with a person who was not a teacher. An interesting outcome was that when the Engagement Project Officer first tried to contact families using the school phone number it was very often unsuccessful. This was not true however when she used a school supplied mobile phone.
- Clarity of the role. The Engagement Project Office's sole focus was on providing support for identified students and their families. There was no conflict with other roles and no distraction from the purpose.

- The Engagement Project Officers links with and understanding of community agencies.
- Commitment of the school leadership to the project. This provided the key message to the whole college community that it was committed to success for all through partnering with families. It also provided credibility and importance to the project and the role of the Engagement Project Officer.
- The willingness of community agencies to work with the college. The project was overseen by a School Community Action Team (SCAT) with representatives from the college leadership, Moreland City Council, Salvation Army, Headspace and the Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network (INLLEN). The Family-School Partnerships Framework was instrumental in the establishment of the SCAT and development of an action plan to enhance family engagement at the college.
- The understanding that 'success' looks different for different students/families. Although the primary aim was always to improve student achievement, specifically in Literacy and Numeracy and retain students to Year 12, sometimes a student transitioning to TAFE, employment or an alternative setting was a successful outcome.
- The willingness of primary and secondary schools to work together. Poor communication between the primary and secondary sectors has often been an issue. The attendance and student learning challenges faced by many of the students identified in the project existed throughout their primary schooling. Early intervention with students and families, improved sharing of information especially during Year 6 to Year 7 transition and better understanding of the teaching and learning strategies used in both sectors are important in addressing student disengagement.
- Engagement Project Officer being a member of the Student Welfare Team. This ensured that the Engagement Project Officer was not working in isolation, there was a team approach to working with students and their families, a wide range of resources could be accessed and appropriate professional development and support was available.

Challenges

The significant challenges faced by the project were:

- Many of the families presented with complex profiles including financial difficulties, family violence, substance and alcohol abuse and mental health.
- The engagement issues faced by a significant number of students were prevalent in their primary schooling making it more difficult to address long standing behaviours and attitudes.
- Establishing a coordinated approach to working with agencies. The level of support and commitment from community agencies was outstanding however the expectations of schools and support workers often didn't match and this at times caused conflict and confusion.
- High mobility of workers engaging with the family. The turn-over of staff in community agencies was often significant which meant that families may have worked with a number of different people over a period of time. This occasionally made communication between the Engagement Project Officer and the support worker difficult.

- Many families having had negative experiences with schools and agencies in the past and therefore being wary about future engagement.
- Generally low level of family engagement at the college. The college is strongly committed to improving family engagement with all families and a number of initiatives have been implemented with mixed results. One example was the establishment of a school café. Families were invited on a number of occasions to utilise the café for meetings and/or informal conversations however results on the whole were disappointing. The college has conducted an audit of the current situation using the Family-School Partnerships Framework which was extremely valuable. The results will be used to identify future opportunities to engage with families.
- Continued inconsistent attendance of some students minimised the impact of some intervention strategies and made tracking of progress difficult.
- The rigid structures and processes at secondary schools. Often school expectations are not conducive in engaging with some students and families. Financial difficulties and disorganised practices at home can occasionally create situations where students are in conflict with the school's expectation. The wearing of school uniform every day is but one example.
- Workload of the Engagement Project Officer. The cases are usually complex and many families become dependent upon the level of support they receive. Unless difficult decisions are made to cease involvement with some families at a particular point in time the number of active cases continually increases.
- Lack of appropriate supervision for the Engagement Project Officer. The Engagement Project Officer is often working with complex issues which can be stressful. There is often a lack of appropriate professional debriefing opportunities.

Support

The project has received significant support throughout its duration. This has included:

- Community agencies such as Headspace, Merri Community Health, Salvation Army and Arabic Welfare. Representatives from these agencies were members of the School Community Action Team (SCAT) which oversaw the project. Agencies also supported the work of the Engagement Project Officer through working with students and their families and providing professional advice.
- The Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network (INLLEN). The INLLEN had representatives on the School Community Action Team (SCAT), facilitated the school's work with the Family-School Partnerships Framework, liaised with community agencies and provided regular support and advice. The INLLEN also coordinated the Moreland Youth Commitment which was an important forum which facilitated links between schools and community agencies.
- Moreland City Council which had representatives on the School Community Action Team (SCAT) and consistently supported the college in a range of different ways.
- Local primary schools which worked closely with the Engagement Project Officer and college to support individual students and their families.

Future directions/Next steps

The project has been very successful and has made a significant difference to individual students and their families and, in some cases, siblings in primary school. The project has resulted in stronger links with community agencies and a more coordinated approach to service delivery.
The next steps for the project are:
- Continue to consolidate and build the work of the Engagement Project Officer.
- Continue to work closely with local primary schools to identify students 'at risk' of disengagement as early as possible so that appropriate support can be provided, coordinate the support being provided to students, siblings and their families, share resources, knowledge and skills, improve tracking processes and develop a better understanding of the teaching and learning and welfare practices in both sectors.
- Continue to improve family engagement and communication throughout the whole college.
- Conduct focus groups with students and families to continue to develop our understanding of how to build stronger links with families.
- Work with the school community to identify strategies to improve family engagement.
- Involve students, families and teachers in revisiting the Family-School Partnerships Framework.
- Continue to conduct conversations with families to enhance the support provided to students.
- Continue to develop the café as a place in which families, teachers and students can meet informally.
- Continue to consolidate the links with community agencies and further develop how the relationship can best support students and their families.
- Celebrate the benefits and achievements of the program to other schools and support them in establishing similar projects.
- Continue to develop our understanding of the issues that impact on student disengagement and improve our intervention strategies.
- Engage with primary and secondary schools to develop an understanding of the magnitude of the problem, share ideas and investigate how to make an impact at the local and system level.

Relevant research and resources

As indicated earlier one of the primary documents that informed the project was the Moreland Under 16 Project. The findings of this report were substantiated in a similar research project conducted in the Hume Local Government Area and documented in the Hume Under 16 Project report.

During the past two years the college has made a number of presentations on the work of the Engagement Project Officer and the School Community Action Team. This included presenting at the Joining the Dots forum organised by the INLLEN, speaking at a Moreland Youth Commitment Network meeting and presenting to community agency staff at a professional development day.

Significant data that could influence policy direction

The data clearly shows the significant impact that the support provided by the Engagement Project Officer has had on student outcomes and family engagement. There was improvement in attendance and Reading and Numeracy data which was pleasing in light of the significant challenges faced by many of the students. Although there was a high level of mobility, 83% of students remained engaged with education with the remaining 16.7% transitioning to employment. The case studies highlighted the support provided by the Engagement Project Officer, the impact her work had on individual students and their families and the key role she played in liaising with community agencies.

The data provides a strong argument that:

At the school level:
- A person with appropriate experience and qualifications that is solely dedicated to providing support to individual students and their families can have a significant impact on student outcomes and family engagement.
- Support from the Student Welfare group is crucial in ensuring a coordinated approach to student engagement issues.
- Support must be provided to families that face significant issues impacting on their child's engagement with education.
- Strategies must be implemented to strengthen partnerships with families in order to ensure successful outcomes for all students.
- A coordinated approach with community agencies is paramount in addressing the significant issues faced by many students and their families.
- The establishment of a School Community Action Team is an effective strategy to promote collaboration and coordinate services.
- Tracking student's attendance, achievement outcomes and transition data is crucial in providing appropriate support to students.
- The Family-School Partnerships Framework is a helpful tool in supporting schools to enhance family engagement.
- A strong relationship between the secondary college and its feeder primary schools is crucial in identifying students 'at risk' of disengagement, ensuring appropriate and accurate information about students is communicated, improving teaching and learning and enhancing family engagement.

At the system level:
- When schools and community agencies within a network/region take collective responsibility for students appropriate support is provided that leads to improved outcomes.
- Tracking student data is important in identifying the needs of students and their families and coordinating appropriate support.
- The present data tracking systems are inadequate which makes the interrogation of data difficult and unhelpful.
- Data at the network and regional level is fragmented, uncoordinated and unhelpful and a more coordinated and informative approach is needed.
- Family engagement is paramount in achieving successful outcomes for all students and a greater commitment at the system level is required.

- Support from organisations such as the Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN), local government and community agencies has a significant impact on developing strategies to strengthen family engagement and this needs to be encouraged across the network of schools.

At the government level:
- Funding is required to assist schools to employ appropriately qualified staff to work with disengaged students and their families.
- Recognition that student disengagement is often a combination of a range of factors which can include significant family issues that need to be addressed in a coordinated manner.
- Stronger relationships between primary and secondary schools are crucial in identifying students 'at risk' of disengagement as early as possible.
- Recognition that often student disengagement is evident in primary school and that early intervention is crucial in addressing the contributing issues as soon as possible.
- Successful outcomes for all students is a community responsibility and that support for strong relationships between schools and community agencies is paramount.
- Further work is needed to develop innovative and effective strategies to improve family engagement.
- Recognition that success for different students can be measured in a variety of ways. Literacy, numeracy and completion of Year 12 is always the aim however transition to TAFE or employment is also a successful outcome for some students.

Bibliography

Audas, R., & Willms, J. D.(2001). *Engagement and Dropping Out of School: A Life-Course Perspective*. Quebec: Human Resources Development Canada.

Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., & Morrison K. B. (2006) *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts.* Washington: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Butler, H., Bond, L., Drew, S., Krelle, A., & Seal, I. (2005). *Doing it Differently: improving young people's engagement with school.* Melbourne: Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Kellock, P., (2011). *The Moreland Under 16 Project*. Melbourne: Inner Northern Youth Connections Consortia & Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network

Lamb, S., & Dulfer, N., (2008) *Predicting disengagement and its effects: What evidence is there on the extent to which disengagement can be predicted at younger ages? (8-12)* Melbourne: University of Melbourne.

Lamb, S., Walstab, A., Teese, R., Vickers, M., & Rumberger, R. W. (2004). *Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia.* Brisbane: Queensland Department of Education and the Arts.

Murray, S., Mitchell, J., Gale, T., Edwards, J., & Zyngier, D. (2004). *Student disengagement from primary schooling: a review of research and practice. A report to the CASS foundation.* Melbourne: Monash University.

Neild, R. C., & Balfanz, R. (2006). *Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 200-2005.* Philadelphia: Philadelphia Youth Network.

Rotermund, S. (2007). *Why Students Drop Out of High School: Comparison from Three National Surveys.* Santa Barbara: University of California.

Rumberger, R. W. (1995). Dropping Out of Middle School: Multilevel Analysis of Students and Schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(3), 583-625*.*

Rumberger, R. W. (2007) *Early Predictors of High School Graduation and Dropout.* Santa Barbara: University of California.

Rumberger, R. W., & Thomas, S. L. (200). The distribution of dropout rates among urban and suburban high schools. *Sociology of Education, 73*(1), 39-67.

Russell, J., Ainley, M., & Frydenberg, E. (2005). *Schooling Issues Digest: Student Motivation and Engagement.* Canberra: Australian Government: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

Wehlage, G. G., & Rutter, R. A. (1986). Dropping Out: how much do schools contribute to the problem? *Teachers College Record, 87*(3), 374-392.

Willms, J. D. (2003). *Student Engagement at School: A sense of belonging and participation. Results from PISA 2000.* Paris: OECD