



Save the Children®

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

HANDS ON LEARNING:

KEEPING YOUNG PEOPLE CONNECTED
TO EDUCATION AND BUILDING
CAPACITY FOR FUTURE SUCCESS

March 2019

HANDS ON LEARNING

A program supported by Save the Children



Save the Children is a leading independent international organisation for children and child rights operating in over 120 countries. In addition to our work in development, disaster recovery and humanitarian assistance overseas, Save the Children operates programs across 200 sites in every state of Australia and the Northern Territory. Our work in Australia is focussed on ensuring that all children are on track for healthy development. We do this by trialling and scaling evidence-based solutions to ensure that the most vulnerable children have access to quality learning opportunities, have a safe and supportive family environment, and live in communities that reduce rather than amplify life stressors.

By merging with Hands on Learning, we have continued to build our programming suite across the educational support spectrum: from supported play groups which help families who face barriers accessing early education programs, to programs like Cool for School which teaches emotional regulation to primary school students and our recognised Out Teach Program which reconnects young people formally disengaged from education and training.

Hands on Learning started in Frankston, Victoria in 1999. The program is now run in more than 100 schools across year levels five to ten. In 2017, Hands on Learning merged with Save the Children Australia to reach more students at risk of disconnecting and disengaging from school. Students work collaboratively across ages with artisan-teachers on projects including creative construction (HoL Build) and hospitality (HoL Café) to develop confidence and skills that can help them re-connect to school and set them up for future success.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2019, the world for young Australians continues to change at a rapid pace. It is crucial that we support every last child to achieve the education that they deserve in order to prepare them for it. Education is a proven game-changer which can help improve social mobility and mitigate inequality of opportunity, particularly for young people who experience disadvantage.

Yet, there are a number of students disengaging and disconnecting from school. These students are in danger of reduced educational attainment or early school dropout – with flow-on effects for employment, welfare reliance and other negative life outcomes. This must change. We need to make disengagement at school a clear priority for governments, educators and parents. This includes identifying at-risk students early, particularly in the middle years, from nine to fourteen years old - a key developmental stage.

Promisingly, the education policy and funding landscape has shifted over recent years. Needs-based funding will enable schools and governments to direct more resources to students who require extra support. States and territories are individually starting to address student engagement in schools. However, to ultimately determine the scale of the issue and develop solutions, greater national leadership is needed.

We need to improve our understanding of what constitutes disengagement and develop consistent data and measurement to better identify students at risk of disengagement in the key middle years of development.

We need to invest in a sustainable and accessible national evidence base to allow schools to determine what works to improve student engagement and trial programs for their individual needs.

There is also an urgent need to support those students who are disengaging now and are at risk of early drop out. This is one of the reasons why in 2017 Save the Children merged with Hands on Learning Australia. This strategic merger was aimed at scaling up across Australia the proven model that Hands on Learning has developed to support young Australians to stay connected to school and thereby improve their educational and life outcomes.

Starting in Frankston, Victoria in 1999, Hands on Learning is now run in more than 100 schools across year levels five to ten in Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania and Queensland. This paper draws on evidence amassed through 20 years of implementing the Hands on Learning program and other research to outline:

- **THE CHALLENGE:** the multiple and complex reasons why many young people aren't staying connected to learning leading to disengagement and risk of early-school drop out.
- **THE CHANGE ON THE GROUND:** New evidence from the 2018 Hands on Learning Parental Survey confirming that young people are building connection, capacity and meaning in their educational journey through Hands on Learning.
- **FUTURE DIRECTIONS:** lessons that can be learned from state, territory and federal government initiatives in student engagement that can drive change at a national level.

Ultimately, this paper proposes practical solutions to address the pressing need to ensure more young people stay engaged and complete education. To better equip students to be connected and confident learners at school, we are calling for federal, state and territory governments to:

1. Work with and resource schools to develop improved nationally consistent data collection to more effectively measure student engagement outcomes in school education.
2. Develop an independent national education evidence base to help schools across Australia identify 'what works' to support disengaged young people.
3. The immediate national scale up of Hands on Learning to 300 Australian schools to support students in their middle years of schooling stay connected to education while building their capacity and confidence.

We urge governments, schools, communities and parents to support these future directions to avoid the well-established negative outcomes that can occur through disengagement and early school leaving. By intervening early, particularly in the middle years, we can help keep more young people connected and on track at school and provide the skills they need for future success.

I. THE CHALLENGE: TOO MANY AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS ARE DISENGAGING FROM LEARNING

The importance of student engagement for educational outcomes

Education is a game changer. It can help all children – regardless of circumstances – to succeed. It can also help lift children out of situations of entrenched disadvantage. However, not all children are engaged in a classroom setting which can inhibit their participation and learning outcomes. Others are failing to show up at school and ultimately dropping out.

We know that school attendance is crucial with studies showing clear links between increased levels of attendance and educational achievement.¹ Not only that, achievement relates not only to current experiences of school but also in earlier years – meaning absences in earlier years matter and that students need to be supported early.² However as the Productivity Commission highlights ‘in 2018, across all schools attendance rates decreased from Year 7 to Year 10 – from 92.5 per cent to 88.8 per cent’.³

Ultimately, attendance rates are only a proxy measure for engagement because a student may be presenting at school but failing to achieve their potential.⁴ This is particularly the case while school attendance is compulsory until the end of Year 10 – after which young people are required to participate in full-time education, training or employment or a combination until 17 years of age.⁵ This is why there needs to be a deeper focus on engagement and connection to learning particularly in primary and middle school.

The Grattan Institute undertook an analysis of the current situation of the level of engagement in Australian classrooms to demonstrate this as a growing issue of concern.⁶ For example, one West Australian study finds that around 40 per cent of school students are unproductive in any year, in a study spanning cohorts of students from years 2, 4, 6 and 8 who predominantly came from low socioeconomic schools.⁷

It is also important to dispel the myths around the nature of disengaged student behaviour. A common stereotype is students display aggressive or anti-social behaviour. However, behavioural issues can take a number of shapes. A survey of almost 1400 South Australian teachers found that 60 per cent of unproductive behaviours were ‘innocuous’, with teachers mainly identifying disengaged and low level disruptive behaviours.⁸ For example, unproductive or low-level disruptive behaviours most commonly include talking out of turn, avoiding schoolwork or disengaging from activities in the classroom.⁹ However, they can also range to more complex needs through abuse to the teacher or other students or being physically aggressive.¹⁰

In addition to attendance, there should be a greater focus on engagement at school through developing a positive learning disposition. Engagement is defined as not just turning up, but also a student’s connection with learning.¹¹ Some frameworks have distinguished between cognitive engagement – that is a student’s own investment in learning such as achieving goals and academic self-regulation, behavioural engagement – participating in school activities and attending to behavioural rules and emotional engagement – the sense of identifying with learning and maintaining relationships between peers, teachers and schools.¹² This holistic approach is one which more accurately captures the complexity of disengagement and also the fact that disengaged behaviour can manifest in a variety of ways.

¹ Hancock, K. J., Shepherd, C. C. J., Lawrence, D., & Zubrick, S. R. (2013). Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts. Report for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra, pg 251. Accessed at: https://www.telethonkids.org.au/globalassets/media/images/pagessections/news--events/2013/march/final_report_2013.pdf.

² Ibid, pg 257.

³ Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services, ‘School Education’, 2019, Section 4.11.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The National Youth Participation Requirement.

⁶ Goss, P., Sonnemann, J., and Griffiths, K. (2017). Engaging students: creating classrooms that improve learning. Grattan Institute.

⁷ Angus et al, 2009 in Goss, P., Sonnemann, J., and Griffiths, K. (2017). Engaging students: creating classrooms that improve learning. Grattan Institute, pg 10.

⁸ ‘Disengagement not disruption key issue in classrooms’, UniSA, media release, Feb 1 2013. Accessed at: <http://www.unisa.edu.au/Media-Centre/Releases/Disengagement-not-disruption-key-issue-in-classrooms-/#.W6gwrPZuKHt> For further information, also see: Sullivan, et al, ‘Punish Them or Engage Them? Teachers’ Views of Unproductive Student Behaviours in the Classroom’, Australian Journal of Teacher Education, Vol 39, 6, June 2014

⁹ Sullivan, et al, ‘Punish Them or Engage Them? Teachers’ Views of Unproductive Student Behaviours in the Classroom’, Australian Journal of Teacher Education, Vol 39, 6, June 2014, pg 49.

¹⁰ Ibid, pg 50.

¹¹ Engagement in Australian schools, Curriculum and Leadership Journal, Volume 12, Issue 4, 14 March 2014. Accessed at: <http://www.curriculum.edu.au/leader/engagement1.37021.html?issueID=12851>

For example, the middle years between 9 and 14 years of age are a 'key developmental stage' where being engaged in learning and developing high self-esteem is beneficial in the long term for students.¹³ It is also a key time of cognitive development while neurobiological processes mature. This carries risk and reward. Young people can develop the capacity to establish goals and self-regulate behaviour. However, failing to develop these strategies can create 'skill deficits' and young people can develop behavioural patterns such as disengagement and withdrawal.¹⁴

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has acknowledged that there is a strong correlation between young people's disposition and self-belief and their likelihood of connection to learning.¹⁵ For example, self-belief or motivation can flow through to better performance in literacy.¹⁶ Other skills like teamwork can also be beneficial. For example, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) found that disadvantaged students were more likely than advantaged students to say that teamwork brings benefits, on the measures that it improves their own efficiency and helps them make better decisions than as individuals.¹⁷

Students need to retain a connection to their school and learning in primary and middle school years. This requires not only ensuring attendance at school but looking at how engaged young people are in their learning journey. Practical ways to achieve this are explored further in the analysis of Hands on Learning in Section II.

Disengaging and leaving early can lead to poorer life outcomes

The process of disengagement can start a negative cycle. For those still at school, disengagement can translate to higher rates of absences which can correlate with lower level of achievements including on standardised tests.¹⁸ Disengagement also contributes to negative health and wellbeing outcomes fostering further issues with mental health or encouraging risk-taking behaviour.¹⁹ For a 'significant minority', the end point of disengagement is dropping out of school early.²⁰

We know the non-completion of school or failure to gain other post-secondary qualifications substantially increases the risk of young people not making a successful transition into full time employment.²¹ Lack of qualifications means that workers are more likely to be unskilled with flow on effects including: higher unemployment rates, higher take up of welfare benefits and larger participation rates in labour market programs.²² In contrast, those with higher levels of education are more likely to have higher paying jobs, better health, and less engagement with criminal activity.²³

Staying in school has a flow on economic impact. The Mitchell Institute has calculated the costs of lost opportunity. It found that having 38,000 people aged 19 who will never achieve Year 12 costs the taxpayer more than \$12 billion over a lifetime, due to increased costs in lost tax payments, increased spending in criminal justice, and higher reliance on government healthcare and welfare payments.²⁴ An earlier piece of analysis by Deloitte Access Economics, 'The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving', found that the net benefit of providing Hands on Learning to students between 1999 and 2012 was \$1.6 billion representing a \$12 return to every \$1 of investment in ensuring Year 12 completions.²⁵

 *Early school leavers cost the taxpayer more than \$12 billion over a lifetime due to reduced tax payments, increased spending on criminal justice and higher reliance on government healthcare and welfare.*

(Mitchell Institute, 2017)

These poorer life outcomes could be avoided by focussing on the students who are likely to disengage and drop out of school early. Identifying young people at risk in the middle years (9-14 years) in primary and middle school and intervening early could help set them on a more positive development trajectory.

¹² Fredericks, et al cited in D. Lester, 'A Review of the Student Engagement Literature', Focus on Colleges, Universities and Schools, Volume 7, No. 1, 2013.

¹³ 2018-2021 Department of Education, Child and Student Wellbeing Strategy: Safe, Well and Positive Learners (Tasmania), pg 23. Accessed at: <https://documentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/Documents/Child%20and%20Student%20Wellbeing%20Strategy.PDF>.

¹⁴ Farrington, C. et al, 'Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: the role of Noncognitive factors in shaping school performance: A critical literature review', The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, June 2012, pg 56.

¹⁵ OECD, (2004) Learning for Tomorrow's World – First Results from PISA 2003, pg 156.

¹⁶ OECD (2015), Skills for Social Progress: The Power of Social and Emotional Skills, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, pg 24.

¹⁷ PISA 2015 Results (Volume V): Collaborative Problem Solving, Published November 21 2017, pg 114.

¹⁸ Hancock et al, 2013 in Hancock, KJ, and Zubrick, SR., 'Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school', Commissioner for Children and Young People, Western Australia, June 2015 (updated October 2015), pg 22.

¹⁹ Ibid, pg 22.

²⁰ Ibid, pg 23.

²¹ Deloitte, 2012 in Social Ventures Australia, Fundamental principles for youth employment, March 2016, pg 12.

²² OECD, 2005a, 2006a, 2006b in Heckman, J and Jacobs B, 'Policies to Create and Destroy Human Capital in Europe, Discussion Paper No. 4680, December 2009, Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA), Germany, pg 4.

²³ Lamb, S. and Huo, S. Counting the costs of lost opportunity in Australian education. Mitchell Institute report No. 02/2017. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne, pg 10.

²⁴ Lamb, S. and Huo, S. Counting the costs of lost opportunity in Australian education. Mitchell Institute Report No. 02/2017. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne.

²⁵ Deloitte Access Economics, 'The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving, 2012, pg 21.

What makes children at high risk of disengagement

There is a growing body of evidence that can help identify risk factors that make young people more likely to experience poor educational attainment, disengage from education and in some cases drop out of school entirely. **For example, the Mitchell Institute has found that only 74 per cent of students attain a Year 12 certificate or equivalent by age 19.**²⁶ As previously highlighted, other students may be in the classroom but failing to meet their full potential due to a lack of connection with learning.

Unfortunately, how well students do at school in Australia is linked to factors like **socio-economic status**. The Mitchell Institute's analysis of who was 'missing out' on educational opportunities found that socio-economic status was an important factor across all key milestone areas: pre-school, Year 7, Year 12 and adulthood – and 'about 40 per cent of young people from the lowest SES backgrounds do not complete Year 12 or its equivalent by age 19'.²⁷ The impact of socio-economic disadvantage has also been confirmed in both Gonski Reviews into Australia's education system.²⁸

Concentration of disadvantage is also a factor, with some postcodes exhibiting poorer educational indicators than others. In Queensland for example, in the most disadvantaged 3 per cent of postcodes, young adults were nearly 5 times more likely to be disengaged from education or employment.²⁹ In South Australia, 'more than 60 per cent of teachers in low-SES schools report[ed] disruption in class several times daily, whereas only 10 per cent in high SES schools report such problems'.³⁰

Students from an **Indigenous background** are also more likely to have lower school engagement. A 2017 analysis by Curtin University found that there was a clear gap between students from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background in terms of attendance and retention. For example, there was a rapid deterioration in Indigenous attendance rates on reaching secondary schooling and a widening gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students which reached 15 percentage points by Year 10 (2016 figures).³¹ While acknowledging that attendance is an imperfect measure of engagement, attendance is also linked to performance. The Northern Territory Government found that 60 per cent of Northern Territory Indigenous students who attend four days or more per week, achieve or exceed the national minimum standard across NAPLAN testing.³²

There is also a strong correlation for child educational outcomes and **parental attainment of education**. The Grattan Institute found in 2016 that the gap between students with parents who have low education levels compared to those with highly educated parents, grows from 10 months in Year 3 to over two years by Year 9.³³ **Parental aspirations can also play a role.** Academic socialisation by parents is very important – the process in which parents communicate their expectations of education and support educational aspirations.³⁴ Parents might have their own poor experiences of formal schooling which can result in intimidation or distance from school.³⁵ Socio-economic status and parental attitude can also impact on attitudes to education. For example, 58 per cent of students classified as low socio-economic status reported their parents wanted them to go onto further school – compared to 73 per cent for high socio-economic status students.³⁶

²⁶ Lamb et al, 2015 in Mitchell Institute, Submission to Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, 2017, pg 2.

²⁷ Lamb, S, Jackson, J, Walstab, A & Huo, S (2015), Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute. pg vi.

²⁸ Review of Funding for Schooling Final Report December 2011; Through Growth to Achievement: The Report of The Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, March 2017.

²⁹ Vinson T. and Rawsthorne M. with Bavis A. and Ericson, M., , Dropping off the Edge Report 2015, Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia Summary, pg 6. Accessed at: <http://k46cs13u1432b9asz49wnhcx-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/DOE-Summary-Report-A4-for-email7.pdf>.

³⁰ Sullivan et al, 2014 in Goss, P., Sonnemann, J., and Griffiths, K. (2017). Engaging students: creating classrooms that improve learning. Grattan Institute, pg 11.

³¹ Cassells, R., Dockery, M., Duncan, A. and Seymour, R. , Educate Australia Fair? Education Inequality in Australia, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, June 2017, pg 23.

³² Every Day Counts: Northern Territory Government School Attendance and Engagement Strategy 2016-2018, pp 10-11 Accessed at: https://education.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/457504/school-attendance-strategy-2016-2018-every-day-counts.pdf .

³³ Goss, P., Sonnemann, J., Chisholm, C., Nelson, L., 2016, Widening gaps: what NAPLAN tells us about student progress, Grattan Institute, pg 1.

³⁴ Emerson, L., Fear, J., Fox, S., and Sanders, E. (2012). Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research. A report by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau: Canberra, pg 37.

³⁵ Ibid, pg 37.

³⁶ Polidano et al, 2013, Hancock, KJ, and Zubrick, SR., 'Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school', Commissioner for Children and Young People, Western Australia, June 2015 (updated October 2015), pg 26.

More broadly, there are a number of characteristics which can make **the home a stressful environment** for the child creating further barriers to engaging, and in some cases attending school. These include: poverty, aggressive behaviour, physical or substance abuse or a culture of delinquency in the family.³⁷

Students who don't feel like they belong at school may struggle to form connections with teachers and other students.

This feeling of exclusion or lack of emotional engagement can foster disengagement. Connection to school is also a protective factor for students – decreasing their likelihood to engage in risky behaviour and also leading to better academic achievement.³⁸ Students' poor interpersonal relationships with teachers or other staff can also correlate with 'disruptive conduct, passivity, withdrawal, disinterest and lack of initiative'.³⁹ This can lead to feelings of exclusion and disengagement from the school – a lack of connection.⁴⁰

PISA measures sense of belonging, along with other factors, to see how ready young people are to cope with life after secondary school. Compared with students across the OECD, Australian students have a 'significantly poorer sense of belonging at school'.⁴¹ These measures included student self-assessments of whether they make friends easily at school, feel they belong at school, feel that students like them or feel like an outsider.⁴² This was particularly true for female students, Indigenous students and those from a lower socio-economic background. Concerningly, Australian students' sense of belonging has declined from 2003 to 2015. The University of Melbourne suggests that factors which impact on school belonging include 'student-teacher relationships, supportive parents and peers, and individual characteristics such as self-efficacy and adaptability'.⁴³

As outlined above, students can disengage from education for a variety of reasons, but we are accruing increasing knowledge about the likely risk factors. The next task is leveraging this knowledge to ensure mainstream school settings can work for these students in the future.

³⁷ Quinn et al, 20015 Hancock, KJ, and Zubrick, SR., 'Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school', Commissioner for Children and Young People, Western Australia, June 2015 (updated October 2015), pg 21.

³⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 'School Connectedness', last updated August 7 2018. Accessed at: https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/school_connectedness.htm.

³⁹ Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Schulz & Rubel, 2011 in Davdand, B. 'Belonging and Participation in School in Australia', in Cuervo, H. Wyn, J., Fu, J. Davdand, B. and Chalukulu Bilinzozzi, J. (2017) Global Youth and Spaces of Belonging in China, Australia and Tanzania. Melbourne: Youth Research Centre, pp 5-6.

⁴⁰ O'Donovan, R., Berman, N. & Wierenga, A. (2015) How schools can move beyond exclusion, International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19:6, pp 645-658.

⁴¹ De Bortoli, Lisa, "PISA Australia in Focus Number 1: Sense of belonging at school" (2018), pg 12. Accessed at: <https://research.acer.edu.au/ozpisa/30>

⁴² Ibid, pg 21.

⁴³ K. Allen et al, 'Why don't Australian school kids feel a sense of belonging', Melbourne University Pursuit, 15 July 2018. Accessed at: <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/why-don-t-australian-school-kids-feel-a-sense-of-belonging>.

II. DELIVERING CHANGE ON THE GROUND: HANDS ON LEARNING IN ACTION

The Hands on Learning Model

Hands on Learning, a program supported by Save the Children, has been delivering a model of school student engagement for almost 20 years to support students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who disengage. The model focuses on ensuring young people's connection to schools is fostered, the capacities and skills of young people are developed, and they gain confidence and meaning from what they do at school.

Identified disengaged students are supported by artisan-teachers on practical projects that take them outside the classroom one day a week. Starting in Frankston, Victoria in 1999, the programs now serve more than 100 schools across year levels five to ten in Victoria, Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania. Students work collaboratively across ages with artisan-teachers on projects around their school and in the community including creative construction (HoL Build) and hospitality (HoL Café) with scope to change and grow according to the need of the school.

While schools employ artisan-teachers through their own funding streams and provide the supplies needed for the projects, the program is supported by a secretariat in Save the Children. This enables quality control across different school institutions while ensuring fidelity to the established pedagogical model and connects staff and students to a collegiate network to share ideas and inspiration.



creating a place to belong on school grounds but outside the classroom,



supporting people to belong with small teams working with an artisan teacher to build strong relationships,



learning by doing through real life projects and giving back to the school community,



developing skills and strategies to enable students to shift attitudes and behaviours which can be barriers to learning in the classroom.

The Hands on model aligns closely with elements of student engagement which constitute good practice. For example, a US analysis of 4,000 interviews of students and parents found that out of school time programs with improved outcomes for students include: positive and trusting relationships, decision making, emotional and physical safety and a focus on social skills e.g. teamwork, leadership and resolving conflict.⁴⁴

Keeping students on school grounds but outside the classroom is particularly important as qualitative research identified in a case study of Hands on Learning at Benalla. Targeting students before disengagement is entrenched provides 'a 'release valve' of a day out of their normal classes, working co-actively on community projects within a relationship-based setting'.⁴⁵ The 2012 Deloitte study into the benefits of Hands on Learning highlighted that real retention rates for Hands on Learning students were above 95 per cent each year for the 10 years until 2009.⁴⁶ Working within the mainstream school setting to re-ignite young people's interest in learning is one of the unique differences of the Hands on Learning approach to other off-site engagement programs.

⁴⁴ Moore, K. and Hamilton, K. 'How Out of School Time Program Quality is Related to Adolescent Outcomes', Child Trends Research Report, Publication 2010-19.

⁴⁵ M. Turnbull, 'Positive, Practical and Productive: A Case study of Hands on Learning in action', Youth Research Centre, University of Melbourne, May 2013, pg. 6.

⁴⁶ Deloitte Access Economics, 'The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving', September 2012. pg 14.

The Evidence: Parents tell us the model works

Hands on Learning and Save the Children are focussing on finding new ways to measure how students feel before and after their engagement in their program. Ultimately, the goal is not only to re-engage young people with education before they drop out but also equip them with the tools to succeed at school. **That's why for the first time in 2018 parents of the young people who participate in Hands on Learning were surveyed to gain a better picture of how the program can transform lives.**

Despite growing recognition of the importance of parental engagement in learning, **the voice of the parent is a key gap in the research on student disengagement in Australia** which often focuses on students and teacher.⁴⁷ The development of the parental survey of Hands on Learning participants is a step towards addressing this gap.

We surveyed almost 150 parents (n=149) from 21 schools in three States across Australia who provided formal feedback on the impact of Hands on Learning on their children in fields such as attendance, belonging, teacher relationships and capabilities. For example, **99 per cent of parents reported that their child enjoys the chance Hands on Learning gives them to learn by doing real and meaningful things.** Full results can be found at [Appendix A](#) but are discussed in more detail below.

This survey supports the evidence we have built from our use of a 'proof of concept' measurement tool originally developed by the University of Melbourne through an Australian Research Council Linkage grant to better measure how students connect to learning, beyond attendance.⁴⁸ Called the Connection, Capacity and Meaning Framework, it has enabled a more sophisticated way to measure student engagement.

This framework has enabled Hands on Learning to develop a survey to capture improvements in student engagement and connection following participation in the program, against a baseline of student experience of a typical school day prior to starting the program. This has been further supported in 2018 by an analysis of students' perspectives of the capabilities they have developed following participation in the program. The full results of the 2018 student outcomes survey are found at [Appendix B](#).

The Results: Providing connection, capacity and meaning to students in school

Breaking down the survey results from parents and students in each of the three themes of the Connection, Capacity and Meaning Framework, demonstrates how students are more engaged in their classroom and learning through:

- **CONNECTION:** how included and listened to students feel at school
- **CAPACITY:** how much students feel they learn and develop skills at school
- **MEANING:** how much students feel that what they are doing matters to them⁴⁹

CONNECTION – how included and listened to students feel at school

☞ *My son was reluctant about going to school but since he's been participating on HoL he's been going with no excuses, also he's been including himself in other programs that are available at the school.*

Parent, Victoria⁵⁰

Section I highlighted that feelings of belonging at school have declined in Australia. This means fostering a connection to school remains incredibly important as a key protective factor. **In 2018, 86 per cent of parents say that since being in Hands on Learning their child's sense of belonging at school has improved and 85 per cent say that Hands on Learning is the main reason their child has been engaged and motivated to come to school.**

⁴⁷ Hancock, KJ, and Zubrick, SR., 'Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school', Commissioner for Children and Young People, Western Australia, June 2015 (updated October 2015), pg 53.

⁴⁸ Wyn J. et al, 'Enabling Spaces for Learning: a knowledge archive and shared measurement framework', Youth Research Centre, April 2014.

⁴⁹ Wyn J. et al, 'Enabling Spaces for Learning: a knowledge archive and shared measurement framework', Youth Research Centre, April 2014. This was further discussed in the paper by O'Donovan, R., Berman, N. & Wierenga, A. (2015) How schools can move beyond exclusion, International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19:6, pp 645-658.

⁵⁰ Hands on Learning Parental Survey Results 2018.

Importantly, the relationships built between the staff and teachers of Hands on Learning extend to other areas.⁵¹ Artisan teachers will share progress with classroom teachers to reinforce student changes. One parent states that her child with behavioural issues had increased enjoyment of school and built more positive relationships with staff and students following participation in the program.⁵² Another parent noted if it hadn't been for the program her son would have dropped out in Year 7 – with the team at the school acting as 'nurturing, caring and wonderful mentors' to her son.⁵³

For students themselves, they also noted a marked improvement in their connection to school – increasing from 3.10 to 3.94 on a 5 point Likert scale.

CAPACITY – how much students feel they learn and develop skills at school

 *This is such a valuable program to young learners especially the ones who do not fit into mainstream learning.*

Parent, Victoria⁵⁴

Learning by doing is the cornerstone of success for Hands on Learning – reaching out to students who are disconnected from the traditional classroom and giving them practical learning experiences. **In 2018, 95 per cent of parents say that since being in Hands on Learning their child has developed new work and life skills making them more job ready.**

For marginalised students, learning experiences that are 'relevant and personally engaging' such as applied 'hands on' learning are regarded as particularly successful.⁵⁵ The skills which are built through Hands on Learning focus on working in teams, communicating with others and problem solving. In addition, skills like incidental literacy, practical maths, planning and other general skills are also developed.⁵⁶

The OECD notes that fostering social and emotional skills are just as important as cognitive skills as briefly discussed in Section I. In particular, there is a strong argument that skills or capabilities, like self-confidence, team-work and problem-solving are much more malleable and early investment in forming these skills is 'more likely to be efficient in raising socio-economic outcomes and reducing inequalities'.⁵⁷ **In 2018, Hands on Learning students believed their capabilities in problem solving, leadership, self-regulation, teamwork and communication all improved following participation in the program.**

MEANING - how much students feel that what they are doing matters to them

 *[My son] looks forward to every Friday with such motivation, it is by far his favourite day of the week. He says he likes being able to contribute and feels like he is a part of something special.*

Parent, Victoria⁵⁸

The sense of meaning fostered by the Hands on Learning model extends to the idea of giving back to the school community. For students who may have been regarded as disruptors or not engaged in the classroom – there is physical evidence on school grounds of their contribution. This could be a park bench, a pizza oven or providing coffee and cakes to students and teachers through a café.⁵⁹ **In 2018, 86 per cent of parents observed that their children's confidence in what they could achieve has improved following participation in the program.**

⁵¹ Turnbull, 'Positive, Practical and Productive: A Case study of Hands on Learning in action', Youth Research Centre, University of Melbourne, May 2013, pg 14.

⁵² Hands on Learning Parental Survey Results 2018.

⁵³ Hands on Learning Parental Survey Results 2018.

⁵⁴ Hands on Learning Parental Survey Results 2018.

⁵⁵ Te Riele, K. (2014). Putting the jigsaw together: Flexible learning programs in Australia. Final report. Melbourne: The Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning, pg 28.

⁵⁶ Staff in M. Turnbull, 'Positive, Practical and Productive: A Case study of Hands on Learning in action', Youth Research Centre, University of Melbourne, May 2013, pg 11.

⁵⁷ Kautz et al, OECD (2015), Skills for Social Progress: The Power of Social and Emotional Skills, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, pg 25.

⁵⁸ Hands on Learning Parental Survey Results 2018.

⁵⁹ O'Donovan, R., Berman, N. & Wierenga, A. (2015) How schools can move beyond exclusion, International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19:6, pp 645-658.

As one parent states: ‘This program has been the best thing for my son. He loves to build and the positive feedback he gets by seeing something he’s built make a change for the school really builds his confidence.’⁶⁰ Earlier academic work by O’Donovan et al confirm this approach, arguing that a contribution of something of worth to others can suggest to students that their contributions are valuable as well.⁶¹

Students who come through the program often identify aspirations which may previously have been out of reach. One parent identified that ‘it is the only part of school that my child can be a responsible leader with confidence’⁶² while another stated that their child had a self-worth that was not there previously.⁶³ **That feeling of meaning for students – that what they were doing in school mattered to them – increased from 2.92 to 3.84 on 5 point Likert scale following participation in the program.**

This evidence from parents and students demonstrates the significant impact of Hands on Learning for these young people. Investing in early intervention programs can help target students at risk of low attendance and disengagement at a critical stage of their emotional, social and academic development.

Capabilities and confidence

There is growing recognition of the importance of developing capabilities in young people and the impact they have on a young person’s educational development and future professional opportunities.

Capabilities have been described in different ways. The OECD argues there is a need for social and emotional skills as well as cognitive skills to succeed in life.⁶⁴ A NSW review of the key skills that Australian students need for the 21st Century emphasises the following: critical thinking, creativity, metacognition, problem solving, collaboration and cooperation, motivation, self-efficacy and sense of agency, conscientiousness, grit and perseverance.⁶⁵

Deloitte considers capabilities like self-management, problem solving, emotional judgement and teamwork as ‘soft skills’ and forecasts that soft-skill intensive occupations will ‘account for two thirds of all jobs by 2030’.⁶⁶

They are described in the Australian Curriculum as general capabilities such as: literacy, numeracy, ICCT capability, personal and social capability, ethical understanding, intercultural understanding and critical and creative thinking.⁶⁷

A recent study by the Mitchell Institute demonstrates the importance of building these capabilities in students at all levels of their learning journey and calls for further investment in their measurement.⁶⁸ The growing focus on capabilities aligns well with Hands on Learning’s focus on building capabilities in problem-solving, teamwork and confidence.

⁶⁰ Hands on Learning Parental Survey Results 2018.

⁶¹ See O’Donovan, R., Berman, N. & Wierenga, A. (2015) How schools can move beyond exclusion, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19:6, pp 645-658. Accessed through Researchgate.

⁶² Hands on Learning Parental Survey Results 2018.

⁶³ Hands on Learning Parental Survey Results 2018.

⁶⁴ OECD (2015), *Skills for Social Progress: The Power of Social and Emotional Skills*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris.

⁶⁵ Lamb, S., Maire, Q., and Doecke, E., *Key Skills for the 21st Century: an evidence-based review*, Future Frontiers, NSW Department of Education, 2017.

⁶⁶ Deloitte Access Economics, *Soft skills for business success*, DeakinCo, May 2017, pg 1.

⁶⁷ <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/>.

⁶⁸ Lucas, B. & Smith, C. (2018). *The Capable Country: Cultivating capabilities in Australian education*, Mitchell Institute policy report No. 03/2018. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne.



 **Mel: Mum**

“Hands on Learning has helped both my kids stay at school longer.

Brooke wouldn't have finished Year 10 without HoL. She had stopped coming to school for a whole term until HoL motivated her to start coming again. For Brooke it took away the stress of the classroom. In HoL kids get a chance to learn by their mistakes and without her even realizing it, in HoL they learn Maths, English and life time skills. The classroom doesn't teach teamwork, but in HoL decisions need to be made as a group. Every school should have HoL because some kids learn better by 'doing it' and they don't get that opportunity in the classroom.

Mitch was disruptive in class, too much talking. HoL helped Mitch with communication, leadership and teamwork. He learnt to take instructions, as well as give instructions, and he got to feel that he could add his thoughts into the mix. The difference between HoL and class is that in HoL everyone gets to speak, everyone is on the same level – there's no 'I'm at the top of this mountain'. Everyone's equal in HoL.

Mitch sums it up best “It's easier to be a physical learner than writing it in a book. I wouldn't be at school without HoL.”



 **Veronica: Mum**

“Vichelle loves it. She is up early and so ready to come to school on her HoL Café day. It's a relaxed environment that gives her a space to breathe, a break, and helps her focus for the rest of the week. And it's really developed her leadership skills. She was never someone who liked teamwork, but she's found her feet, started leading the way, and found her spot in life. If you can see an opportunity for a child to learn skills they can use for the rest of their lives, why be the anchor holding them back instead of being the rocket leading them to the stars?”

III. FUTURE DIRECTIONS: LESSONS FROM JURISDICTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While programs like Hands on Learning drive change at a school and community level, we believe that the education system needs to change as well. There is an increasing recognition of the importance of engagement in schools and the different ways that students learn. However, while there is progress at a state and territory level, this is not being leveraged for substantive change at a national level.

This may be because the strengths and challenges of Australia's federal system are exemplified in education policy. While states and territories remain responsible for the delivery of primary and secondary schooling, the consequences of improved educational attainment and its opposite, early school drop out, have consequences that places a demand on federally funded services. As highlighted in Section I, leaving school early impacts national social and economic outcomes such as employment, productivity, healthcare and engagement with the welfare system. We believe there is a critical role for the federal government in prevention by elevating the issue of student engagement nationally. One way of pursuing that objective is through investing in the development and transition to scale of 'supply side' interventions that can be integrated into the mainstream school education system across Australia.

This final section considers the role of the federal government, emerging good practice from states and territories, and suggests future directions for consideration by decision-makers to more systematically address student disengagement.

The federal government

The federal government has previously acknowledged the importance of addressing disengagement in schools – albeit indirectly. An evaluation of the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions (2009-2014) found that 'reducing early school leaving is more efficient and effective than treating disengagement at a later stage'.⁶⁹ However, recognition of the importance of acting early may have diminished in recent years.

The defunding of a key program emerging out of the National Partnership, 'Youth Connections' which worked across the engagement continuum, in the 2014 Federal Budget was justified in a statement by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education that 'It is the responsibility of state and territory governments to ensure that young people stay in school until they are 17 as per their own legislation'.⁷⁰ That said, more recently, the federal government have announced a \$313 million youth employment strategy, including \$13.5 million for early school leavers to direct them back towards education and training or look for work.⁷¹ This however, is primarily targeted at students aged 15-21, on Youth Allowance and who have not achieved Year 12 or a Certificate III certification.

Despite this, there has been a welcome bipartisan investment in education at the school level which includes greater collaboration between the federal government and states and territories. This has been driven by federal governments commissioning two Reviews by David Gonski – the first focussing on school funding and the second on improving academic achievement.⁷² Successive federal governments have sought to implement these recommendations with their state and territory counterparts.

One main outcome is a shift to needs-based funding for students. This now involves the development of base estimate (the Schooling Resource Standard) to determine how much total public funding a school needs to meet the educational needs of students – and extra loadings for students who may need it. Loadings target students who face disadvantage such as students with a disability, students with low English proficiency, students who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, school location/size and students who come from a socio-educationally disadvantaged background.⁷³

⁶⁹ Dan Dolop Partners, COAG National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions: A Report for the Department of Education, 16 January 2014, pg 7.

⁷⁰ S. Ryan in Edwards, A. 'Fears disengaged teens will be lost as Youth Connections program cut', ABC online, 18 Dec 2014. Accessed at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-12-18/youth-connections-program-cut/5967908>.

⁷¹ Budget 2015-16, 'Youth employment strategy', Accessed at: https://budget.gov.au/2015-16/content/glossy/sml_bus/html/sml_bus-14.htm; See also <https://www.jobs.gov.au/engaging-early-school-leavers>.

⁷² Review of Funding for Schooling Final Report December 2011; Through Growth to Achievement: The Report of The Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, March 2017.

⁷³ <https://www.education.gov.au/what-schooling-resource-standard-and-how-does-it-work>.

Where do we go from here?

We believe the additional pool of needs-based funding is a key way to provide targeted support to students who are disengaged, particularly given disengagement's strong relationship with disadvantage discussed in Section I. The increased funding suggests that there will be more demand from schools to invest in programs which can help ameliorate disadvantage and other factors which hold back students. We believe that fostering improved engagement outcomes should be a key part of this. However, our experience and research tell us that there are some gaps that governments could further consider as key future directions of policy development.

First, without clear and consistent data collection and engagement outcome measures embedded across schools, schools and government will be unable to tell where programs and teaching are making a difference.

Second, increased funding through Gonski is occurring in a corresponding trend to the devolution of decision making authority on the expenditure of funding at a school and community level.⁷⁴ This empowers schools, parents and communities to make more decisions on tailoring programs and supports to their students. However, at this stage, there is not a common national repository of information of program evaluations of 'what works' which are accessible to individual schools to promote maximum impact by investment in successful interventions already developed.

Finally, despite growing evidence of the cost of disengagement at school and over a lifetime, there are not nationally scaled up approaches of models that have proven to work, particularly ones situated within the mainstream schooling system.

In light of these gaps, we argue that there is a need for greater investment in:

- nationally consistent data and outcome measurements on engagement to determine how effectively we are shifting the dial;
- greater coordinated investment in a national evidence base to determine 'what works' for schools;
- and national scale up of proven models to help schools dealing with current cohorts of disengaged students.

This paper finishes by analysing these complementary future directions as recommendations to government, including examples of promising practices from different jurisdictions.



⁷⁴ See for example: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/our-priorities/work-more-effectively/local-schools-local-decisions>; <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/Bracks%20Government%20Response%202016.pdf>; <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/parent-community-engagement-framework/decision-making/index.html>; <https://education.nt.gov.au/education/statistics-research-and-strategies/indigenous-education-strategy/indigenous-education-strategy-issue-19/communities-empowered-in-school-decisions>; .

Recommendation One:

Federal, state and territory governments to work with and resource schools to develop improved nationally consistent data collection to more effectively measure student engagement outcomes in school education and their learning journey.

Despite progress on measuring cognitive, social and emotional development in the earlier years through the Australian Early Development Census across Australia, systematic measurement of a student's holistic development and engagement becomes inconsistent in the middle years across Australia.⁷⁵ This is of concern for student engagement, given its usual proxy – attendance, does not capture the depth of the student experience as we explored in Section II.

While an analysis across each state and territory is beyond the scope of this paper, a short stocktake of examples across jurisdictions shows that state governments and schools are either gathering information on students' experiences and engagement at school or developing the tools to do so. For example:

- The South Australian Education Department has been collecting data on wellbeing and engagement in Years 4 to 9 to see how students experience success and feel supported during middle childhood to enable them to reach their full potential. The report de-identifies individual students and provides population data feedback to schools. This enables schools to apply for funding for additional support, set priorities or determine how to allocate existing resources.⁷⁶
- The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) in New South Wales offers a 'Tell Them From Me' engagement and wellbeing survey for students, parents and teachers which allows measurement of students' social and institutional engagement, wellbeing and exposure to quality teaching practices.⁷⁷
- Queensland's youth engagement strategy calls for regional officers, principals and teachers to pay careful attention to individual student's data and understand their context.⁷⁸ The strategy understands data to include both information about what students know and levels of student resilience, wellbeing and social and emotional development. The Department also offers a practice guide on supporting disengaged students and measuring outcomes, particularly as they shift from a mainstream to flexible learning setting.
- Victoria's Education Department website steps through a student data mapping tool to enable principals and teachers to build on existing data sets, identify students with various risk factors (many of which are outlined in section I of this report) and ensure they are allocating appropriate support and resources, particularly in order to assist with school completion.
- Engagement is included as a key indicator in the Productivity Commission's Annual Report on Government Services using the cognitive, behavioural and emotional engagement framework. This year the Productivity Commission included PISA's 'Sense of Belonging at School Index, 2015' as a measure of emotional engagement. The Commission notes that there is still insufficient data to measure student engagement nationally across behavioural or cognitive engagement, although state and territory surveys are now capturing information across the domains – some of which are highlighted above.⁷⁹

These examples suggest that states are identifying a need for both de-identified population level data to enable comparison and individualised data within schools to ensure programs are targeting the students who need support the most. Ultimately though, governments can't address an issue or design policy solutions without shared clarity of purpose and effective measures. There needs to be more investment in consistent data collection across all states and territories building on existing good practice that the states have underway.

⁷⁵ Torij, K. and O'Connell, M. Preparing Young People for the Future of Work. Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 01/2017. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne, pg 8.

⁷⁶ Uses and benefits of the wellbeing and engagement collection, South Australia Department for Education, 9 May 2017. Accessed at: <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/department/research-and-data/wellbeing-and-engagement-collection/uses-and-benefits-wellbeing-and-engagement-collection>; A review of SA wellbeing surveys was undertaken by the Fraser Mustard Centre in December 2015. Accessed at: <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/g/files/net691/f/development-australian-student-wellbeing-survey-report.pdf>.

⁷⁷ 'Student Survey', NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. Accessed at: <http://www.surveys.cese.nsw.gov.au/ttfm-surveys/student-survey>.

⁷⁸ Queensland Government, 'Everybody's business: Re-engaging young Queenslanders in Education', pg 20. Accessed at: <http://advancingeducation.qld.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/everybodys-business.pdf>.

⁷⁹ Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services, 'School Education', 2019, Section 4.12-4.14. See also Table 4A.27 for discussion of state and territory school engagement survey results.

This should be holistic and focus on the student experience including addressing factors such as connection to school, meaning derived from school and the student capacity built at school as demonstrated in section II. These themes are captured in some of the measures of the self-reporting surveys – such as South Australia and New South Wales. A recent recommendation by the Children’s Rights Report 2018 in Australia prepared by the Children’s Rights Taskforce supports this approach. The Report recommended resourcing a national study to better understand the drivers of student disengagement and how it can be effectively and systematically measured in schools.⁸⁰

In addition to enabling the capture of consistent individualised data for schools, we see merit in building on existing comparative school data sets and for the federal government to have a facilitating role in this – such as through the provision of student engagement and retention data on the MySchool website. This means parents would be able to compare engagement or student wellbeing data in addition to currently reported attendance and attainment measures. It could also enable governments or service providers to better identify hotspots where engagement and wellbeing is an issue of concern.

Recommendation Two:

Developing an independent national education evidence base to help schools across Australia identify ‘what works’ to support disengaged young people.

States such as New South Wales are helping equip schools to know with greater confidence what works. For example, CESE has developed research on student engagement combining results from the ‘Tell Them From Me’ student survey with NAPLAN reading performance.⁸¹ Their analysis shows how student engagement, including experiences in the classroom and teaching can impact on student’s academic performance, particularly at Years 7 and 9. CESE findings also emphasise the importance of a sense of belonging, particularly at times of transition from primary to secondary school.⁸²

Engagement or flexible learning programs have not commonly been brought together to be evaluated under a common framework – this was one of the reasons why Hands on Learning worked with the University of Melbourne to test a new measurement framework. A previous study of flexible learning programs, for example, found that across Australia there were 900 flexible learning programs, which covered programs within mainstream secondary schools, programs within TAFE and community colleges and separate alternative programs.⁸³ These programs, however, are too ‘often isolated, ad hoc and underfunded’ without capacity to determine what works well and why.⁸⁴

Recently, the Productivity Commission looked at the national evidence base for education and found that there needs to be greater evaluation of policies and programs in education to identify what works best – and then to build an understanding of turning that best practice into common practice at ground level.⁸⁵ The Mitchell Institute has also called for a National Education Evidence and Data Institute to coordinate priority research and education practices and disseminate this research and information.⁸⁶ Internationally there are trends towards the increased use of evidence, evaluation and trials to assist schools with this process, including through the UK’s Education Endowment Foundation.⁸⁷ Federally in the social services space, the Try Test Learn fund, is an important data driven approach to trial new innovative approaches to those at risk of welfare dependence and could also have learnings for trialling innovative approaches in the education sector.⁸⁸

The announcement by Labor to deliver an independent Evidence Institute for Schools to undertake this work is a welcome step,⁸⁹ as are efforts by Social Ventures Australia to run a pilot version of the Education Endowment Foundation in Australia through *Evidence for Learning*.⁹⁰ Save the Children Australia has also previously founded a Centre for Evidence and Implementation to improve the better use of evidence in programs and policy. We would further suggest that a useful evidence base for schools and teachers should include a key focus on engagement programs and practices developed in line with the growing data collection and outcomes measurement outlined above.

⁸⁰ Children’s Report 2018, pg 52. Accessed at: <https://www.unicef.org.au/Upload/UNICEF/Media/Documents/Child-Rights-Taskforce-NGO-Coalition-Report-For-UNCRC-LR.pdf> .

⁸¹ NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, ‘Improving high school engagement, classroom practices and achievement, Learning Curve Issue 18, August 2017.

⁸² NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, ‘The role of student engagement in the transition from primary to secondary school’, Learning Curve Issue 19, 23 November 2017 https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/transition-primary_secondary_AA.pdf .

⁸³ Te Riele, K. (2014). Putting the jigsaw together: Flexible learning programs in Australia. Final report. Melbourne: The Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning, pg 17.

⁸⁴ Ibid, pg 16.

⁸⁵ Productivity Commission 2016, National Education Evidence Base, Report no. 80, Canberra.

⁸⁶ Mitchell Institute, Submission to Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, pp 6-7.

⁸⁷ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/> .

⁸⁸ ‘Try, Test, Learn Fund – At-risk young people on income support’. Accessed at: https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/11_2017/ttl_t2_at-risk_young_people_accessible_no_text_box.pdf .

⁸⁹ T. Plibersek and A. Rishworth, ‘Labor to take politics out of the school classroom’, Media Release, 16 February 2018. Accessed at: http://www.tanyaplibersek.com/media_release_labor_to_take_politics_out_of_the_school_classroom .

⁹⁰ <https://evidenceforlearning.org.au/the-toolkit/about/> .

Recommendation Three:

The immediate national scale up of Hands on Learning to 300 Australian schools to support students in their middle years of schooling stay connected to education while building their capacity and confidence.

In addition to building a national evidence base to bring together evaluations of different programs and practices across the country, investment in proven programs with a long history of measurement and tested methodologies is crucial. Despite evidence that programs like Hands on Learning can help children remain engaged in mainstream schools, there is currently no federal mechanism or sufficient funding to bring programs like this to scale across Australia. It is prudent to prevent and mitigate the cost to the taxpayer and to society of disengagement and early school leaving by investing in proven approaches now to help support the current generation of young people before it is too late.

Over the past 20 years, Hands on Learning has built and tested a model of support and engagement across four states to enable a footprint in over 100 schools – with a focus on regions with low levels of socio-economic advantage (ICSEA ranking). However, further investment is needed to maximise impact. The clear impact of this program on the ground is explored more extensively in Section II of this paper.

Over the past two years, Hands on Learning has been recognised by Finnish global education nonprofit [HundrED](#) as one of the world's top 100 most inspiring educational innovations. The time has come to scale up this 'proof of concept' nationwide. We believe that sustainable funding is crucial to ensure the retention of expertise and quality assurance to support further growth across jurisdictions. Piecemeal funding site by site will continue a small-scale approach which makes the coalescence of evidence and practice across jurisdictions challenging to facilitate.

Instead, we suggest there is an opportunity for federal government investment to build sustainable funding in partnership with schools and philanthropy. Federal investment of approximately \$10 million would support the development of the scale up of this innovative program and expertise to ensure:

- fidelity of the internationally recognised Hands on Learning model;
- resource a specialised team to support nationwide quality control and a national secretariat to support school recruitment, program implementation, design, measurement and evaluation consistency across jurisdictions; and
- enable work across jurisdictions to scale and individualise the model to regional clusters of low ICSEA schools to reach a target of national access with 300 schools implementing Hands on Learning and supporting up to 5000 students annually.

This approach would complement the increased supply of funding that schools can access through the needs-based funding model and mitigate the risk of the additional funding in the system being spent 'reinventing the wheel' with well-intentioned pilots, rather than scaling up a proven model that is accompanied by critical support infrastructure through specialised training and a national network of knowledge, ideas and collaboration for teachers and principals. Most importantly, more students Australia-wide would be supported to build capabilities, foster a sense of belonging and reconnect to learning at school.

These future directions build on promising practice across Australia to address disengagement amongst Australian school students. By building a better data-driven picture of what is occurring in our schools, empowering schools with the information to make decisions about what works to support those disconnected from education and scaling up proven approaches like Hands on Learning – we can help make our education system work for more of our young people.

CONCLUSION

Save the Children and Hands on Learning joined forces because we believe that not all children learn in the same way – but all children have a right to a quality basic education. We want to see more young Australians stay connected to school and improve their education and life outcomes. Promisingly, governments and the Australian education system are moving in the same direction through the adoption of needs-based funding and the clear focus on addressing individual children’s needs.

Keeping young people engaged at school needs to be a key part of this transformation. Rather than a bolt-on, as an onsite program HoL is all about enhancing mainstream schooling, fostering systemic change by giving schools greater capacity to engage the breadth and diversity of their students. Not only does it lead to more young people making the most of their educational potential, it can reduce early school drop out and its associated long-term impact on taxpayers and society.

This policy paper brought together our knowledge derived from 20 years of experience in implementing Hands on Learning and identifying the current trends in research and analysis in Australia and overseas.

We outlined the Challenge - too many young people are disengaging. We demonstrated the Change on the Ground – exploring key learnings from Hands on Learning, including the new perspectives of parents captured from our inaugural Parental Survey in 2018. We looked at Future Directions - the need for national leadership to build on promising practices from jurisdictions.

Education is a gamechanger for all students. Engaging all Australian children in their learning journey is key. We call on federal, state and territory governments to ensure that they make this a priority now and into the next decade through:

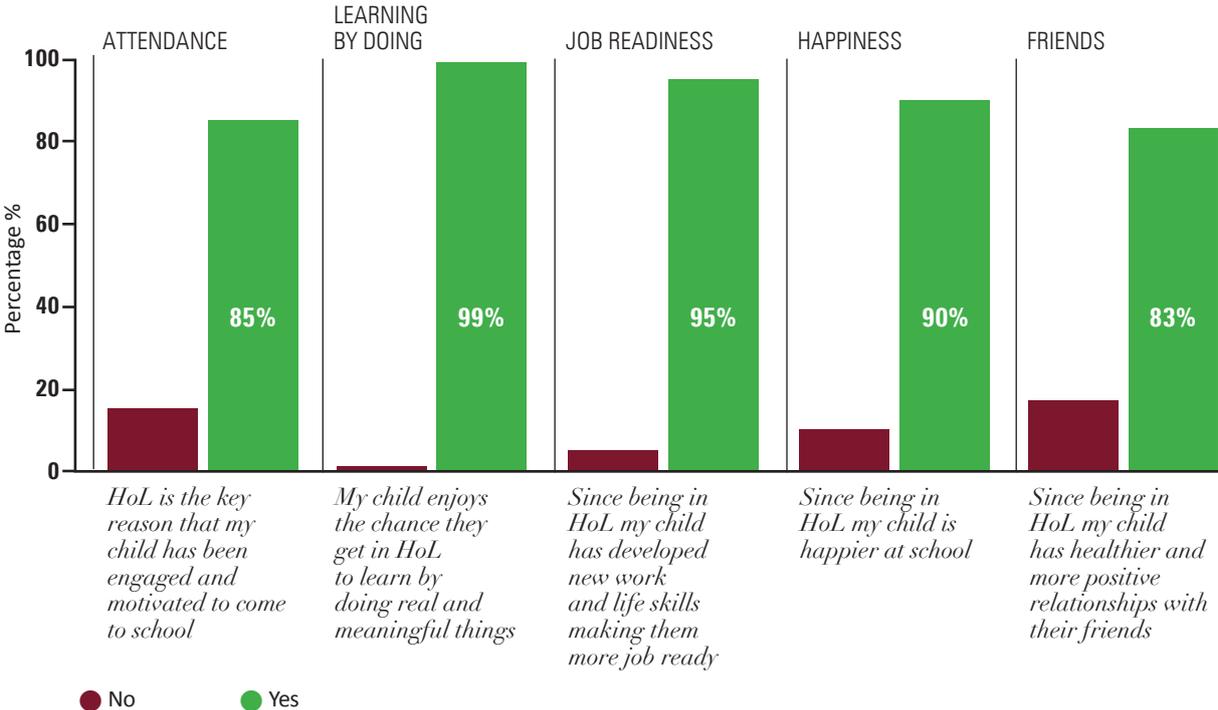
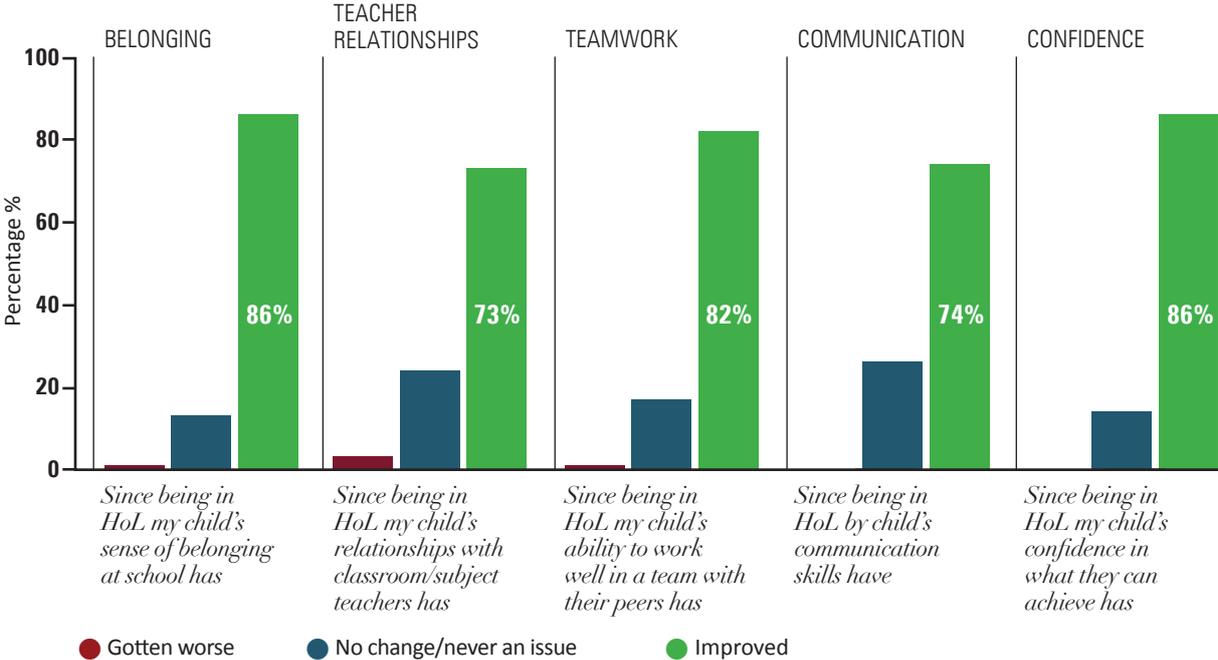
1. Working with and resourcing schools to develop improved nationally consistent data collection to more effectively measure student engagement outcomes in school education.
2. Developing an independent national education evidence base to help schools across Australia identify ‘what works’ to support disengaged young people.
3. The immediate national scale up of Hands on Learning to 300 Australian schools to support students in their middle years of schooling stay connected to education while building their capacity and confidence.



Appendix A – Hands on Learning Parent Survey 2018

PARENTS rate the impact of HoL

149 parents/guardians of students from 21 schools provided feedback about the impact of their children’s participation in the Hands on Learning (HoL) program. Results were collected anonymously and collated automatically via the online Survey Monkey platform at the end of Term Two. Highlights include:

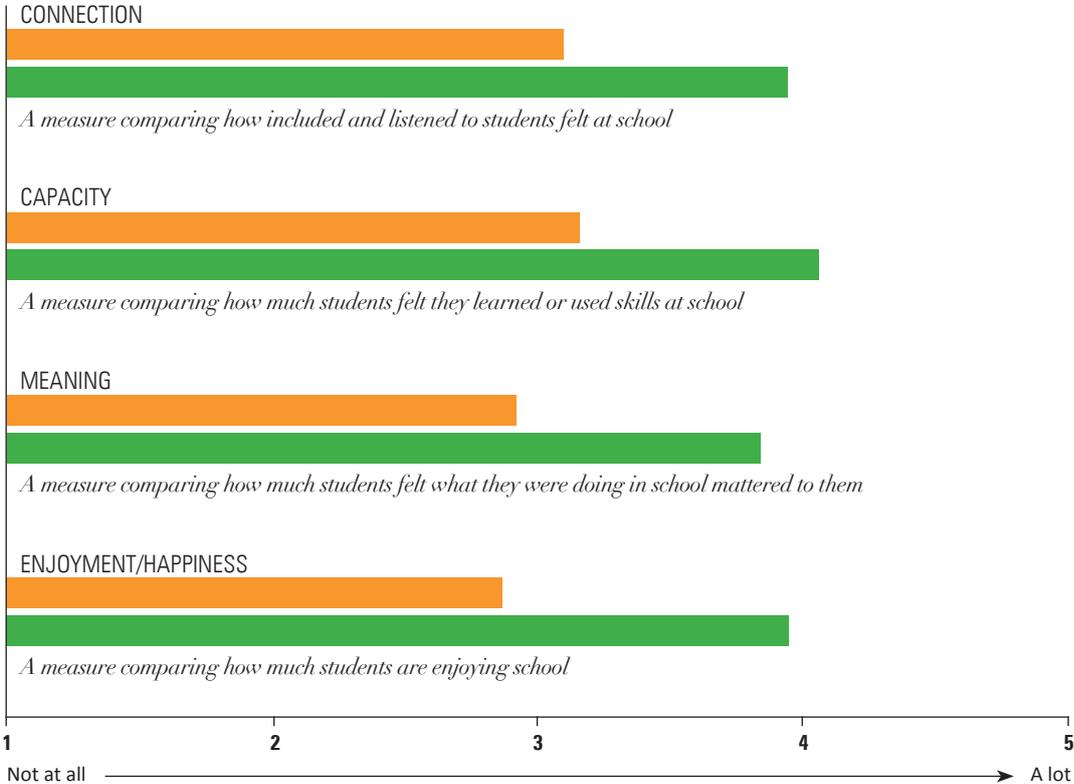


Appendix B – Hands on Learning Student Outcomes 2018

Connection, Capacity and Meaning

Although most students cope well in the typical classroom, there are many who struggle and fail to thrive at school. This is why HoL is first and foremost about providing an enabling space for these young people, giving them the support they need to build friendships and stay connected, develop their skills and capacities, and find a sense of meaning and purpose to the tasks undertaken at school.

The Connections, Capacities and Meanings (CCM) framework used here emerged from our participation in a world first Australian Research Council/University of Melbourne project looking to find a way to more accurately measure the impact of programs like HoL that seek to help young people stay connected to school.



- pre-HoL STUDENTS: HoL students surveyed at intake about their experience of a typical school day prior to starting HoL
- current-HoL STUDENTS: HoL students completed another survey after participating in HoL for a duration of 6 -8 months

Capabilities

Hands on Learning (HoL) provides a practical environment for students to develop personal and social capabilities and the enterprise skills to succeed at school, and in future education and employment.

'Preparing young people for the world of work' (Mitchell Institute March 2017), a policy roundtable report of education practitioners, government leaders, policy specialists and researchers from across Australia, highlights the capabilities that will enable young people to thrive in the complex education and employment settings of the future, including: critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, curiosity, interpersonal and communication skills, self-regulation, grit, entrepreneurial skills, teamwork and craftsmanship.

Students completed a survey prior to commencing HoL and then again after 6-8 months of attendance.



Contact:

Cam Wiseman

Head of School Education Engagement

Save the Children Australia

33 Lincoln Square South, Carlton Vic 3053

Phone: 03 9787 3049

Email: hol@savethechildren.org.au

Web: handsonlearning.org.au

Twitter: [@handsonlearn](https://twitter.com/handsonlearn)