Chapter 6

Improving the engagement of Indigenous students in education

While improving students' well-being and ensuring participation of all students are the first steps to improve student outcomes, student engagement plays a crucial role. Engagement in education is a necessary precondition for student learning so that students can develop their skills and enjoy education. Better understanding how to improve student engagement can help support students to remain in education and do well at it. This chapter investigates the role of student engagement in education and the indicators that reflect it. The analysis explores evidence on student engagement and identifies promising policies and practices to improve it. Recognition and integration of Indigenous values and approaches are critical for achieving improvements in this area.

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

While the first steps in improving education outcomes are to improve student well-being and ensure participation of all students, students must also actively engage in the processes of learning to develop their skills. There are many reasons why students may not engage in learning or school generally, and there is also a wide range of actions that can increase the likelihood that students will engage. Understanding student engagement can help to better support students who are not achieving their potential or who are at risk of underachieving.

Little active monitoring of student engagement is occurring at a system level across most of the Canadian jurisdictions in this study, in terms of either positive or negative indicators of engagement. New Zealand and Queensland, however, both monitor Indigenous students' absenteeism and expulsions.

This chapter investigates the role of students' engagement in education in their well-being and educational achievement, explores evidence on engagement and identifies promising policies and practices to improve it.

Why engagement matters

The process of learning is voluntary and internal. It takes engagement and motivation to learn (Christenson, Reschly and Wylie, 2012). Students' attitudes towards learning, as well as their behaviour in and out of school, have a considerable impact on their performance. This includes the amount of time and effort students invest in learning and students' perseverance and motivation in completing their schoolwork. Thus, student engagement is a necessary, but not entirely sufficient, condition for positive student learning and development.

The OECD evidence base, through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), finds that high-performing students have greater perseverance, motivation and self-confidence than students who do not perform so well. Students who do not do well are more likely to skip classes or days of school, arrive late for school and do less homework than higher-performing students. For example, students who had skipped an entire school day at least once in the two weeks prior to the PISA test in 2012 were almost three times more likely to score at a low level in mathematics than students who did not skip school (more than twice as likely after accounting for students' socio-economic status, gender, immigrant background and attendance at pre-primary education).

By playing truant, students miss out on learning opportunities, increase the likelihood of dropping out of school entirely and limit their lifetime employment opportunities. However, being physically present at school is not enough. Without perseverance, motivation and self-esteem, students may struggle to make the most of available opportunities, regardless of their aptitude.

Students' sense of self-efficacy (the extent to which they believe in their own ability to solve specific tasks) and self-concept (their beliefs in their own abilities) have a considerable impact on their self-confidence, perseverance and motivation, and ultimately on their performance in school (Schunk and Pajares, 2009). Students who lack self-confidence in their ability to complete particular tasks may wrongly assume that investing more effort is a waste of time. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, this leads to less engagement at school and poorer performance (OECD, 2013a).

Students' attitudes towards school and learning are important well beyond their influence on academic success. Feeling safe, socially connected and happy at school are ends in themselves, especially since school is a primary venue for students' social development. The importance of these aspects of school life is reflected in the priority parents give to a pleasant, active and safe environment when choosing a school for their child (OECD, 2015) and in the strong consensus among teachers that the social and emotional development of students is as important as their acquisition of knowledge and skills (OECD, 2013a).

It is vital for education systems to understand the role that student attitudes play in learning, particularly for students who are disadvantaged in some way. Fostering positive attitudes can result in significant improvements in performance at little cost (Dweck, 2006). The value of greater student engagement, perseverance, motivation and self-confidence cannot be overstated.

For students, there are two ways to improve academic performance: invest more time and effort (behavioural) and/or reduce levels of anxiety (affective). Both of these strategies require some changes in students' beliefs and self-beliefs. For example, improving students' confidence in their abilities, knowledge and skills, and instilling in them the conviction that success is the result of hard work (not of innate and fixed traits) (Dweck, 2006) or the belief that academic success leads to professional success can help to reduce anxiety and foster motivation (Schunk and Pajares, 2009). When students feel they belong at school, they are also more motivated. The virtuous circle is complete, because students invest more of their time and effort in their schoolwork when they are motivated.

Indicators of engagement

The OECD has used several measures to capture levels of student engagement and the relationships of these measures with students' academic performance. The two behaviours that impact most on students' academic performance relative to PISA are absenteeism and lack of punctuality. Students who skipped class or days of school in the two weeks prior to the PISA test in 2015 scored, on average, 45 points lower in science than students who did not skip classes or school (33 points lower after accounting for the socio-economic profile of students and schools). Students who reported that they arrived late for school in the two weeks before they sat the PISA test scored, on average, 27 points lower than students who reported they had been punctual (23 points lower after accounting for the socio-economic profile of students and schools).

The impact on students who arrive late for school and skip classes or days of school is that they are not gaining the learning opportunities they need. Students who are disadvantaged or who are struggling with their learning need more rather than fewer opportunities to develop and learn. In addition, students' absenteeism and lack of punctuality can have a disruptive effect on their classmates and their school. This can be particularly problematic for schools that have high proportions of students who demonstrate these behaviours.

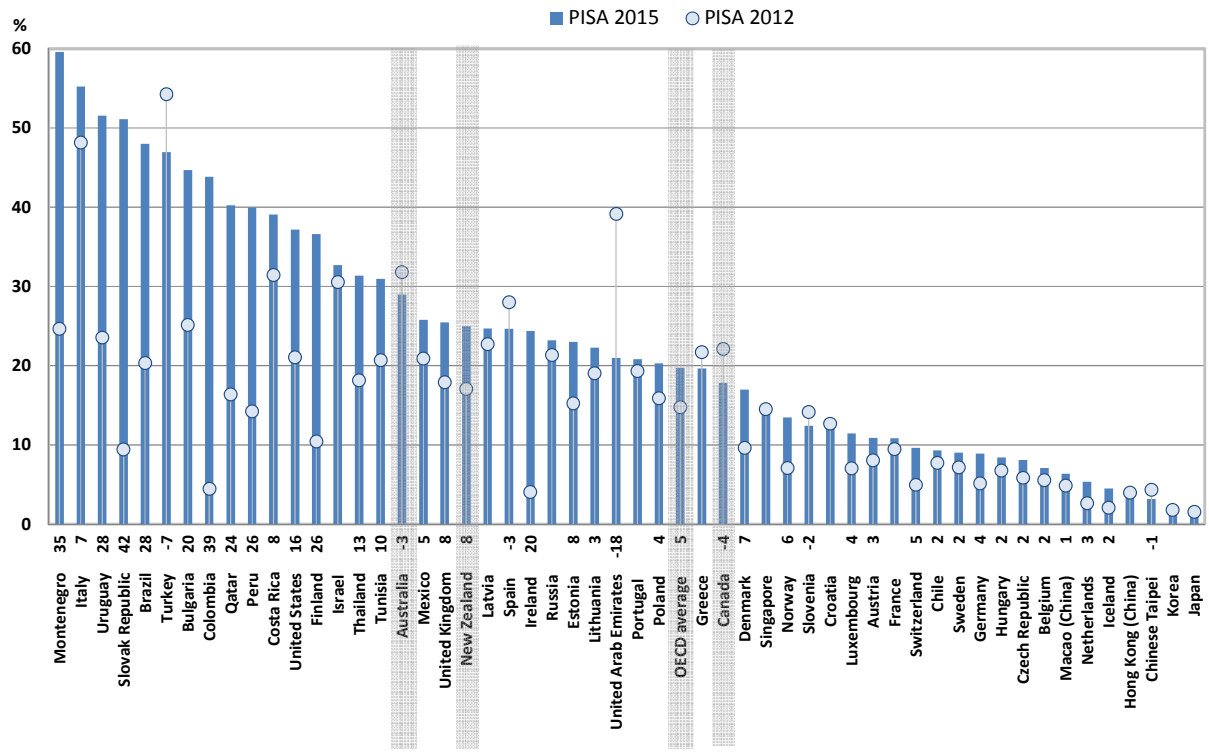
Absenteeism

Absenteeism is a problem in many countries. Across OECD countries, 26% of students reported that they had skipped at least one class, and 20% reported that they had skipped an entire day of school without authorisation in the two weeks before the PISA test. As noted above, across OECD countries, the difference in science performance associated with skipping classes or days of school is 45 score points.

The percentage of Canadian students who skip school is around 18%, just under the OECD average of 20%. New Zealand is well over the average, with a rate of 25%, and Australia reaches 29%. Skipping class is more common among disadvantaged students than among advantaged students in all three countries (Figure 6.1) (OECD, 2016a).

Canadian students who do not do well on PISA are, on average, more likely to have skipped school at least once in the two weeks prior to the 2012 PISA test than low performers in other countries (31.6% of low-performing Canadian students reported doing so, compared to the OECD average of 22.6%). The rate was 44.5% for Australia and 35.1% for New Zealand. For all three countries, there is a strong association between active disengagement from school and poor performance (OECD, 2016b).

Figure 6.1. Percentage of students who skip days of school, 2012 and 2015



Note: Percentage of students who reported that they skipped a day of school at least once in the two weeks prior to the PISA test. Only countries/economies that participated in both 2012 and 2015 PISA assessments are shown. Only percentage-point difference between PISA 2012 and PISA 2015 that are statistically significant are shown next to the country/economy name (see Annex A3 of OECD, 2016a).

Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the percentage of students who had skipped a whole day of school at least once in the two weeks prior to the PISA test in 2015.

Source: OECD (2016a), PISA 2015 Database, Tables II.3.1, II.3.2 and II.3.3, www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2015database/.

StatLink http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933435655.

There are, however, reasons other than engagement that lead students to be absent from school. For example, ill health of students themselves or of other family members is an obvious reason for absence. The need to attend significant events (such as funerals) may affect some groups of students more than others. For students in remote areas, medical or other appointments in the nearest urban centre can result in an absence of several days.

Wherever possible, a distinction should be made between explained and unexplained absences, although both should be monitored for individual students at the school level. What is important is that schools understand what lies behind student absences, and that action be taken to mitigate the negative impacts of such absences on students' opportunities for success.

Punctuality

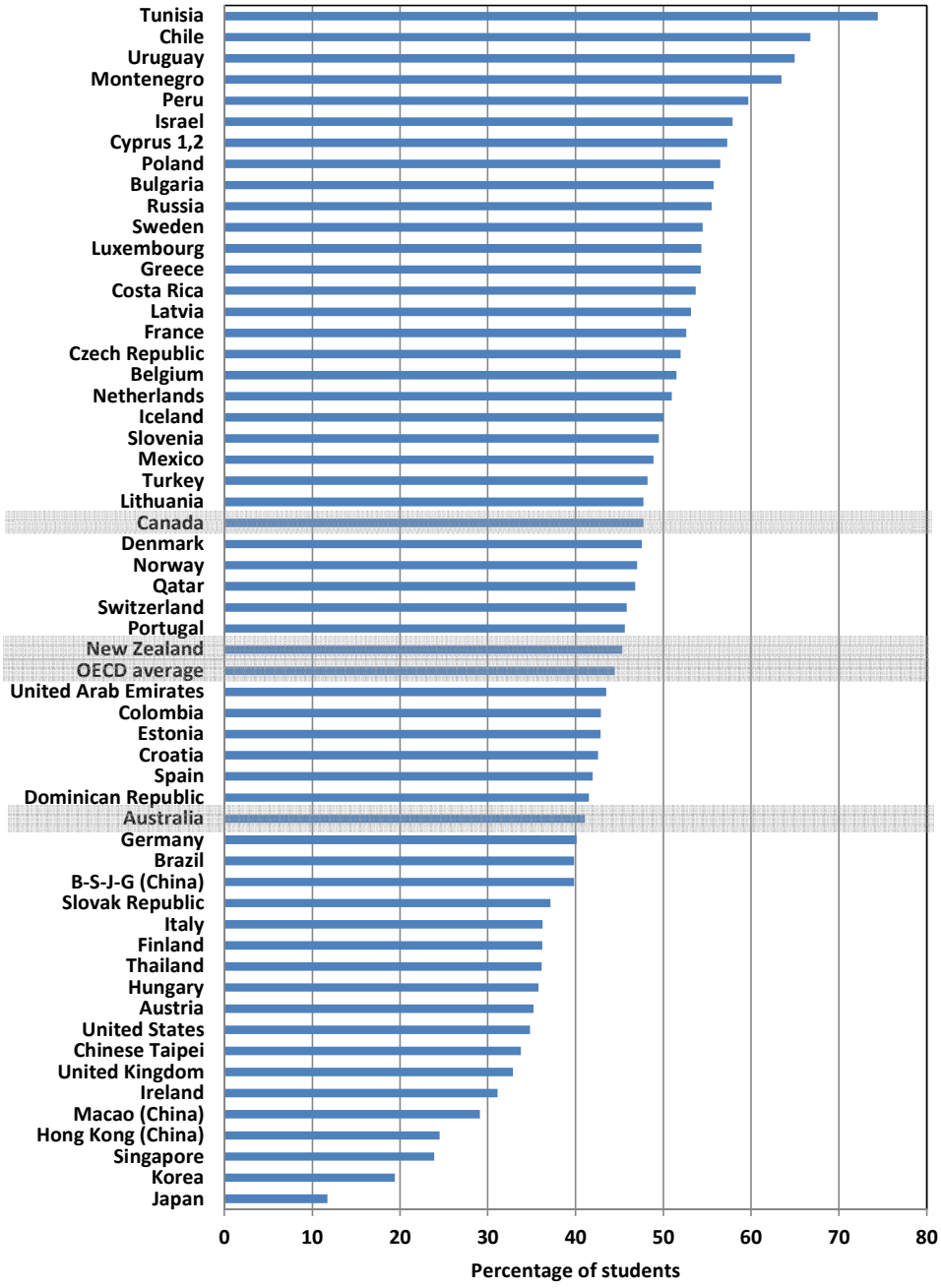
In 2015, significant proportions of students had arrived late for school, without authorisation, at least once in the two weeks prior to the PISA test. On average across OECD countries, almost one in two students (44%) reported having arrived late at least once during that two-week period (Figure 6.2). The percentage is higher, on average, for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (47%) than for those from advantaged backgrounds (43%).

As for skipping class, arriving late for school was more predictive of mathematics performance and was lower than the OECD average in Australia, Canada and New Zealand. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, this performance penalty was higher than the OECD average. Disadvantaged students in Australia, Canada and New Zealand were also more likely to arrive late for school than disadvantaged students in other countries. In New Zealand, more than one in two socio-economically disadvantaged students reported having arrived late for school at least once in the two weeks before the PISA test.

Lack of punctuality may be associated with socio-economic disadvantage for a range of reasons. In some countries, disadvantaged students may have no private means of transportation to school and may need to use public transport or be responsible for getting themselves to school, even at a young age. Where there is public transport, it may not always operate in a regular or reliable fashion. Disadvantaged students may also have more responsibilities than advantaged students, such as the need to look after younger siblings and other family members and to undertake paid work before or after school.

Reductions were achieved in the overall proportion of students arriving late at school between 2003 and 2015 in the three countries in this study. However, these improvements were largely among advantaged rather than disadvantaged students (OECD, 2016b).

Figure 6.2. Percentage of students who arrive late for school, 2015



Notes: Percentage of students who reported that they had arrived late for school at least once or twice during the two weeks prior to the PISA test. Argentina, Kazakhstan and Malaysia were not included in this figure, as coverage is too small to ensure comparability (see Annex A4 of OECD, 2016a).

1. Footnote by Turkey: The information in this document with reference to « Cyprus » relates to the southern part of the Island. There is no single authority representing both Turkish and Greek Cypriot people on the Island. Turkey recognises the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Until a lasting and equitable solution is found within the context of the United Nations, Turkey shall preserve its position concerning the "Cyprus issue".

2. Footnote by all the European Union Member States of the OECD and the European Union: The Republic of Cyprus is recognised by all members of the United Nations with the exception of Turkey. The information in this document relates to the area under the effective control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus.

Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the percentage of students who arrived late, at least once or twice during the two weeks prior to the PISA test.

Source: OECD, PISA 2015 Database (Vol II), Table II.3.1, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933436489.

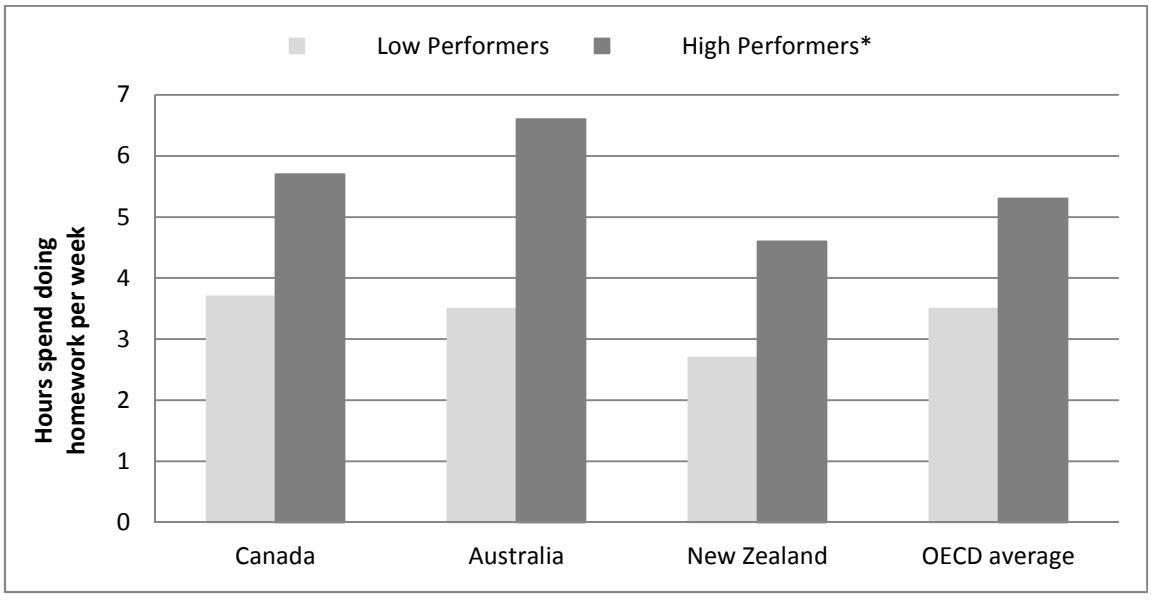
Homework

Academic performance is strongly associated with time spent on homework. On average across OECD countries, students who reported devoting more time to homework were less likely to perform below the baseline level of proficiency in mathematics, even after accounting for socio-economic status, gender, immigrant background and attendance at pre-primary education. Spending one hour per week on homework is associated with a 15% reduction in the probability of scoring poorly in mathematics, compared to doing no homework. Devoting two hours per week on homework is associated with a 36% reduction in that likelihood, and three hours per week is associated with a 50% reduction. The probability of scoring poorly continues to decrease as the number of hours spent on homework increases, but only up to a point, after which there are nil returns on the investment (OECD, 2016c).

There are many reasons why students invest relatively low levels of time on homework. They can include the lack of a suitable, quiet place at home to study, the need to contribute to family and other activities, inadequate parental guidance or supervision in students' younger years, lack of confidence in their ability to understand or complete the homework, and lack of interest in the task and/or subject matter. This last issue is particularly important when curriculum material or education tasks have little relevance or meaning to groups within the student population, including Indigenous students (Young, 2010).

In both Canada and Australia, low-performing students spend about the same number of hours on homework as low performers in many other countries (close to the OECD average for low performers of 3.5 hours). Compared to other students in their own countries, all three groups of low performers undertake less homework each week, and this indicator is particularly pronounced among low performers in Australia (Figure 6.3).

Figure 6.3. Hours spent doing homework, low and high performers in mathematics, 2012



Note: High performers are students scoring above the baseline Level 2 in mathematics.
Source: OECD (2016a), PISA 2015 Database, www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2015database/.

Concentration and effort

Students who do not perform well in PISA report that they find it difficult to concentrate fully on the task at hand. In most countries, these students are less likely than better-performing students to report that they pay attention or listen in mathematics class.

Students who perform at lower levels also report applying less effort than their higher-performing peers, even in the PISA test itself. This difference among students is significant in all three countries participating in this study. While students who felt that they performed badly on the test might be reluctant to accept that they had invested the same effort as other students, these figures offer yet another indication that students who struggle with mathematics may not be applying themselves fully in academic activities.

Progress in monitoring engagement

Monitoring indicators of disengagement of Indigenous students does not appear to be common across the six Canadian jurisdictions in this study, although Nova Scotia and Yukon do have information on the absence rates of Indigenous students during 2015.

No Canadian jurisdiction recorded expulsions or exclusions of Indigenous students,[1] while both New Zealand and Queensland monitored these rates from 2005-15 and 2010-15.

Patterns in engagement

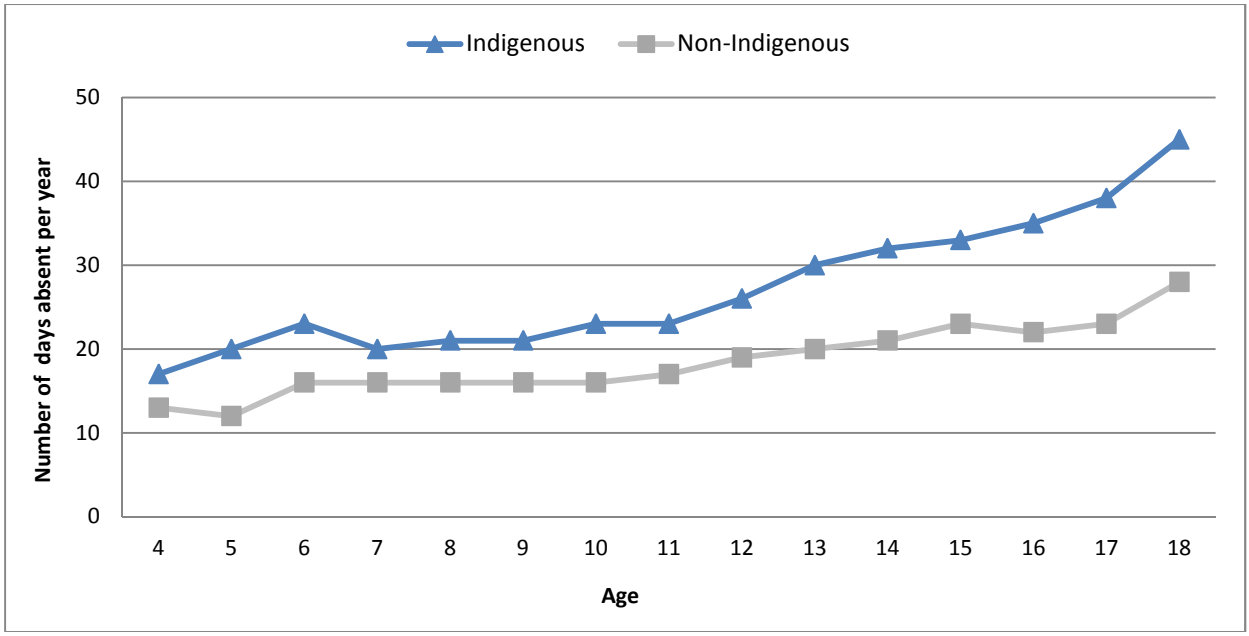
Absenteeism is a significant issue for Indigenous students in the jurisdictions that reported on this indicator. While absenteeism can reflect a range of issues in students' lives, including disengagement from school, it negatively impacts on these students' opportunities for learning and their likely success in education.

Student absences

Based on data from Nova Scotia and Yukon, we can see that absence rates for all students increase as they get older. At all ages, however, Indigenous students have a higher propensity to be absent than non-Indigenous students, and this gap widens from age 13 onwards. The impact on individual students is that they have access to fewer opportunities to learn than non-Indigenous students and are at risk of not being able to make sound educational progress. This leads to lower motivation and increased disengagement.

At the schools we visited, the biggest challenge teachers raised in relation to Indigenous student achievement was the amount of time students spent away from school. Teachers we met at a high school with a relatively high proportion of Indigenous students estimated that most Indigenous students were only at school three to four days a week, compared to an average of four to five days for non-Indigenous students. While some schools appeared to have active and effective strategies to address this, others did not.

Figure 6.4. Days absent of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Canada, 2015

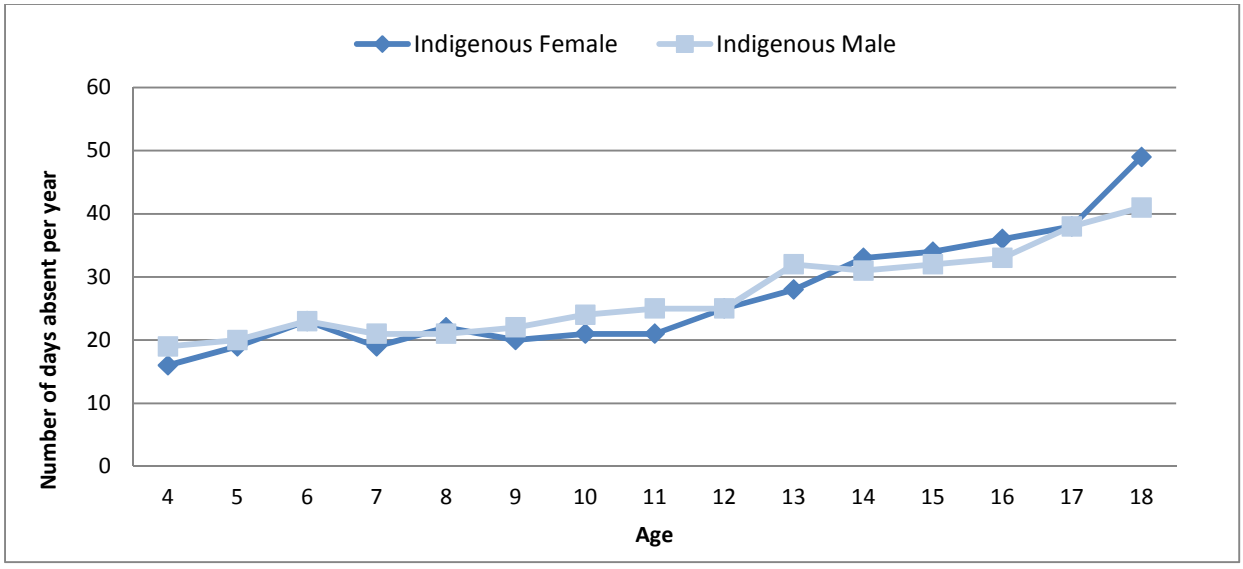


Note: In the figure, Canadian data include only Nova Scotia and Yukon.

Sources: Nova Scotia Education and Yukon Education (2016), Data Questionnaires.

There are fewer differences between individual students on the basis of gender (Figure 6.5). Girls are slightly more at risk of being absent in the earlier years, boys more so in the middle years, and then girls are absent more frequently in the senior years of schooling.

Figure 6.5. Days absent of Indigenous students by gender in Canada, 2015

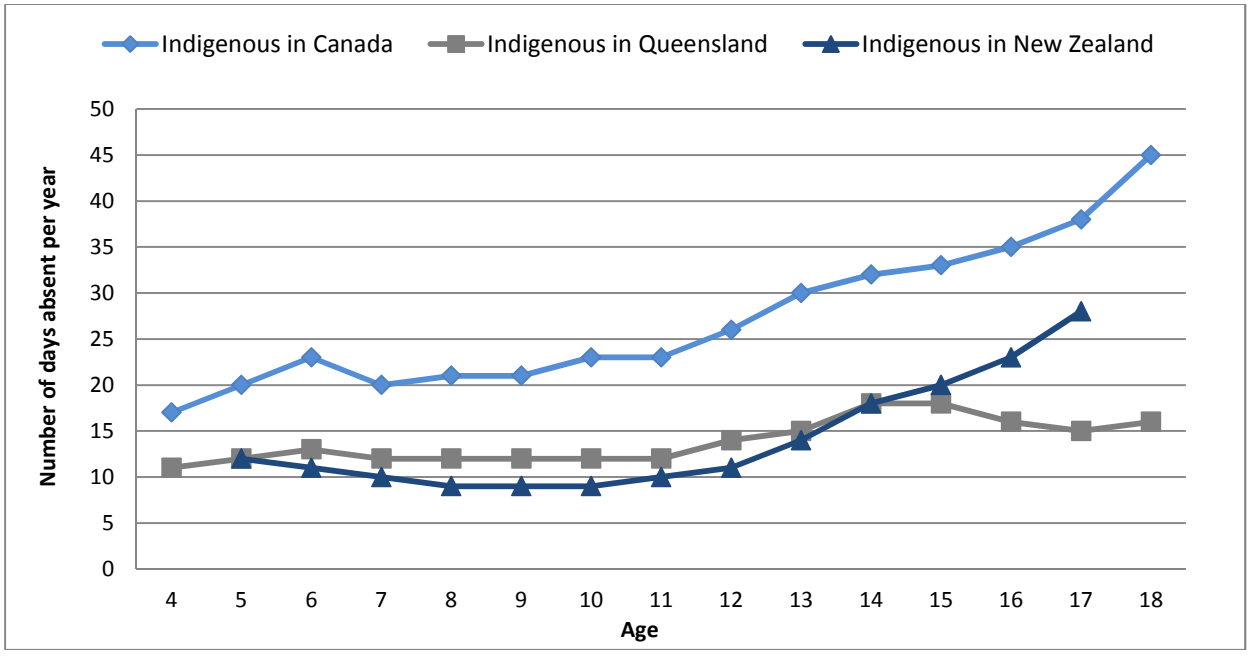


Note: In the figure, Canadian data include only Nova Scotia and Yukon.

Sources: Nova Scotia Education and Yukon Education (2016), Data Questionnaires.

Compared to New Zealand and Queensland, Indigenous students in Nova Scotia and Yukon are much more likely to be absent from school. In addition, the increased risk of absenteeism amongst Indigenous students in older age groups is much less pronounced in Queensland (Figure 6.6).

Figure 6.6. Days absent of Indigenous students in Canada, New Zealand and Queensland, 2015



Note: In the figure, Canadian data include only Nova Scotia and Yukon.

Sources: Nova Scotia Education, Yukon Education, Queensland Department of Education and Training and New Zealand Ministry of Education (2016), Data Questionnaires.

Expulsions

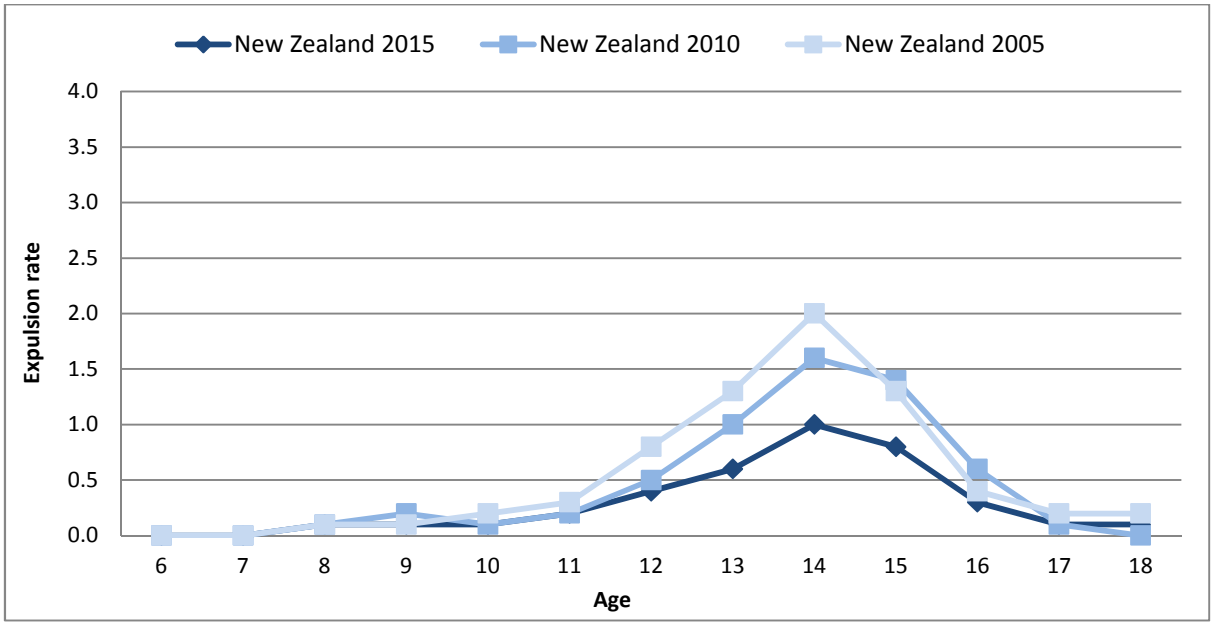
Expulsion from school has extreme consequences for students, severely limiting their ability to successfully complete school and gain the skills and qualifications they need to enter the labour market or further education. Behaviours that result in expulsion are often symptomatic of deep emotional issues that have existed for some time and have not been effectively addressed. Sometimes students act out to get the attention they need or, in some cases, students are simply not aware of the potential implications of their behaviour.

Rules vary hugely across systems, and how the rules are applied is often a matter of judgement by teachers and education leaders. Teachers and school principals may have greater empathy for students they can identify with than for other groups of students, and therefore may apply discretionary rules differently.

None of the Canadian jurisdictions participating in this study provided data on expulsions[2] and exclusions[3], but such data was provided by New Zealand (Figure 6.7).

Indigenous students in New Zealand are more likely to be excluded or expelled than non-Indigenous students. In New Zealand, this gap is most pronounced among students from age 11 to age 16.

Figure 6.7. Expulsion rates of Indigenous students in New Zealand, 2015, 2010 and 2005



Source: New Zealand Ministry of Education (2016), Data Questionnaire.

Policies and practices to improve engagement

Policies and practices that support the engagement of Indigenous students in education and learning are set out below, with examples drawn from across participating jurisdictions. While each policy and practice is likely to have some positive effect on Indigenous students, no single policy or practice is likely to be sufficient to make notable improvements in the engagement of Indigenous students. Rather, it is the combined impact of a tailored set of responses that will be effective. Schools visited for this study that had high levels of engagement among Indigenous students were using a combination of the following practices and policies:

Visibility of Indigenous cultures in schools and classrooms

The visibility of Indigenous cultures in schools and classrooms respects and recognises the importance of the Indigenous peoples of Canada. Schools can support the engagement of Indigenous students by providing environments where Indigenous students feel connected to their culture and valued for their heritage.

An easy action for schools to take is to use signage at the entrance of the school that is symbolic of Indigenous cultures and includes the use of an Indigenous language or languages. Such symbols should not be superficial; they should be integrated into the school ethos and learning activities.

In the Northwest Territories, the need to construct a new school building provided an opportunity to take a new approach. Indigenous cultural symbolism is integrated throughout the school, offering opportunities to learn about Indigenous culture and Northwest Territory history and providing modern, comfortable spaces for students to learn in.

In some cases, school leaders will have to hold their ground in the face of resistance to such changes from some non-Indigenous parents. In one school we visited, the principal was dealing with a campaign by non-Indigenous parents who oppose the installation of a smudging facility on the school grounds. Our overall impression from our visits to schools, however, was that there are very high levels of interest by non-Indigenous students in learning about Canadian Indigenous cultures.

Adopting Indigenous cultural practices

The use of culturally appropriate practices in everyday school life is also an effective way to value Indigenous students and their families. We saw first-hand the powerfully positive effect of smudging on Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in a school environment.

A number of schools use talking circles as a way of connecting with students and of resolving issues. In some cases, Elders and parents are involved, including where there has been conflict between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Such processes have reportedly had positive, sustained impacts for both groups of students.

A high school in Alberta holds eagle-feather ceremonies at student graduations. Indigenous children from local elementary schools are invited to these ceremonies to help them to see that success at the end of schooling is a reality they can achieve.

An example from New Zealand is that of *Te Whakatika*. This is a process of helping students to resolve and make amends for wrongdoing, similar to contemporary restorative justice group conferencing (Hooper et al., 1999). This is a more effective and much less damaging alternative to punishment, such as suspending[4] or excluding students.

Some of the schools we visited ensure that students have the opportunity to experience powwows and sweat lodges. A school in Manitoba that has achieved significant improvements in Indigenous student outcomes uses sweat lodges as a way for teachers to learn about local Indigenous culture and for staff and students to be more connected. A teacher at this school talked to us about her experience of sweat lodges and how such experiences help to create strong connections between staff and Indigenous students. She commented: "We're like a family. Staff are investing in the children, and the children can feel it."

Including Indigenous histories and cultures in the curriculum

Schools that most successfully embed Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum are those that integrate Indigenous history, science and philosophy into all courses, for the benefit of all students. Nova Scotia, for example, has recently integrated Treaty Education into the compulsory curriculum from Grade 1 to Grade 6. The Indigenous leaders we met on the field visits were highly supportive of such developments. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission noted, it is essential for all Canadians to understand this critical part of their history (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

The Australian Curriculum mandates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are a cross-curriculum priority. This means that Indigenous perspectives need to be embedded across the curriculum and that all students engage in reconciliation and recognition of the Indigenous identities and cultures.[5]

Using curriculum resources developed by and reflecting Indigenous peoples

A very easy step for schools to take is to provide and use books and other resources developed by Indigenous people. For example, contemporary texts by Indigenous authors can be integrated as curriculum resources.

Show Me Your Math is a programme developed by researchers at the Faculty of Education at Saint Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia (Box 6.1). The programme supports teachers and students to explore mathematics in their own community and cultural practices. Through exploring aspects of counting, measuring, locating, designing, playing and explaining, students discover that mathematics is all around them. Every year, students gather for an annual mathematics fair to share and celebrate the work they have done.

Box 6.1. Engaging Indigenous students in math

Show Me Your Math

In Nova Scotia, the late Mi'kmaw Elder and quillbox maker, Dianne Toney, explained that to make a ring for a circular box top, she measured three times across the circle with her wood strips and added a thumb width. She declared that it makes a perfect circle every time. This conversation with Dr. Lisa Lunney Borden and Dr. David Wagner prompted the two to consider how Mi'kmaw children might enter into such conversations with Elders in their own communities.

Working with teachers and Elders in *Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey* community schools, Borden and Wagner developed the Show Me Your Math programme. Show Me Your Math is a programme that invites Aboriginal Students in Atlantic Canada to explore the mathematics that is evident in their own community and cultural practices. Through exploring aspects of counting, measuring, locating, designing, playing, and explaining, students discover that mathematics is all around them and is connected to many of the cultural practices in their own communities. Each year students gather for the annual math fair and celebrate the work they have done. The programme began in 2007 and has continued to grow over the years with moves to more classroom based inquiry projects that are known as *Mawkina'masultinej* (let's learn together) projects.

The programme has now spread from Nova Scotia to other provinces and territories, as an effective and engaging way for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to understand and apply mathematical concepts and principles.

Dr. Lunney Borden has also begun a spin off outreach program known as Connecting math to Our Lives and Communities. The programme was designed for students in Grades 4 through 12 as a means to encourage youth to examine and investigate the value of mathematics in their lives and develop an appreciation for how mathematics can have power to shape their futures. Such learning supports students and encourages them to participate in further studies in mathematics and science and develop increased confidence in their mathematical abilities. It also provides opportunities for students to see that mathematics can be a powerful tool for helping the world.

This programme, now entering its third year, is run in four Mi'kmaw and three African Nova Scotian communities in Eastern Nova Scotia. The programme involved Bachelor of Education and undergraduate science and math students working with the school students every two weeks on issues of interest to them. Project work focused on *Reading and Writing the World with Mathematics*, through exploration of social justice issues such as water security and the environment, to patterns and logical reasoning, including technology and coding. Each year the programme ends with an on campus Math Camp day to celebrate the learning that has happened throughout the year and to once again invite students to learn mathematics with both university professors and community Elders.

Source: www.showmeyourmath.ca.

Using learning activities that reflect Indigenous practices or are popular among Indigenous students

A further promising practice that Canadian schools use to engage Indigenous students is to diversify learning activities to include those that draw on Indigenous history and culture or are popular with Indigenous students. These include culturally-based inquiry processes, outdoor and wilderness education programmes and using reservation ecosystems to teach science.

An example of land-based learning is found in Yukon, in the First Hunt, First Fish programme. The course content is established by the local Indigenous community and is popular among students. Schools have had some challenges related to meeting health and safety requirements, but they have largely been overcome.

The learning activities that schools use can make the curriculum much more relevant to Indigenous students' lives, for example by incorporating local places, history and events. These activities will also enrich learning for all students. A specific example of a tailored learning activity is the History in the Hills programme, where the classroom is taken to Indigenous archaeological sites and led by the teachings of First Nations and Métis peoples (Toulouse, 2013).

In one school we visited, Indigenous children were being mentored by a successful local entrepreneur. The students' recent achievements included publishing a bilingual children's book, releasing a language app and making a movie. They won awards for both the book and the app and donated their prize money to the local Head Start centre.

In Queensland, through a diverse range of in-school and extra-curricular activities, the Clontarf Foundation provides mentoring and coaching to Indigenous male students in secondary schools who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging. The Clontarf Foundation builds on Indigenous male students' passion for football to encourage behavioural change, including improving discipline, self-esteem, life skills and employment prospects. Fundamental to this is the development of values, skills and abilities that will assist students to achieve better life outcomes.

Providing a dedicated room for Indigenous students

Providing a dedicated room within schools for Indigenous students gives them a safe place to be and helps them feel they belong. It can provide a respite from the noise and intensity of some school environments, which can be difficult to cope with for children who have transitioned from on-reserve schools. A number of Indigenous students commented to us that these rooms provided them with a place to be away from the racism of other students.

In addition, such rooms provide a space where staff can provide support to students and students can support one another. We saw several examples of such rooms in the field visits, all of which were well utilised and valued by the Indigenous students we met in these schools.

In a high school in Alberta, the dedicated Indigenous students' room is used as part of a graduate coaching programme. Two coaches are available in the room to assist students. One is an academic coach and the other is an Indigenous co-ordinator, who assists students with issues that may be getting in the way of their study programme. Staff at the school have high expectations that students will graduate, and they hold students accountable for working hard to achieve this.

At one school we visited that did not have such a room, the students raised this with us as an improvement they would like to see. They said they would be happy to have somewhere to be that would be "their place".

We are aware that such rooms can be seen as a form of segregation, which can limit the extent of integration of Indigenous students with non-Indigenous students. We would argue, however, that students will only use these rooms if they see benefit in doing so. The use of such rooms is neither compulsory nor exclusive.

In some schools, non-Indigenous students also use these rooms. In some cases, they do so to be with their Indigenous friends, while in other cases it is because they do not feel safe in the wider school during break times. We also acknowledge that while the rooms provide respite for students, they do not address the underlying attitudes and behaviours that lead to students feeling uncomfortable or unsafe.

Providing learning opportunities in Indigenous languages

Offering one or more Indigenous languages to all students builds knowledge, skills and understanding of Indigenous peoples and cultures. Offering Indigenous languages also emphasises the importance and value of Indigenous languages to students, their families and school staff. For Indigenous students, this may be the only opportunity in their schooling years to learn their own language.

A reminder of the importance of language for young Indigenous people is found in the powerful lyrics of "Gentle Warrior":[6]

> I'm trying to speak but I can't find my words
> They snatched it away, shattered my world
>
> [...]
>
> I lost my talk, my courage, my pride
> For 500 years it's been hiding inside

Both teachers and Indigenous students we met expressed disappointment that, in most schools, Indigenous languages are only offered in certain grades and rarely, if ever, at senior levels of high school.

Varying assessment methods

Students' motivation, confidence and achievement can be encouraged through the use of a range of assessment techniques. Exams are necessarily narrow in perspective, so using a broad range of assessments can focus more on students' strengths and build a more enduring sense of efficacy and achievement. Examples include portfolios and performances.

Ensuring that all children and young people are acknowledged for what they know and can do and their interests and aspirations is important for student motivation. A Māori parent in New Zealand summed it up this way: "We should be focusing on success. We need to celebrate the kids' success in all areas, so that they can be proud achievers, passionate and have that confidence." (Meyer et al., 2010).

New Zealand's National Certificate of Education Achievement (NCEA) focuses on recognising, in senior secondary schools, what students know and can do, and where a much wider body of knowledge, including indigenous knowledge and skills, could be valued. Indigenous students have improved outcomes in achieving qualifications under

this more flexible system. In addition, NCEA uses a range of assessment methodologies, allows very flexible collation of credits across a range of subject areas, and students can complete their qualification over more than one school year without necessarily having to complete lower level qualifications.[7]

Visibility of Indigenous people in leadership or governance roles within the school

Ensuring that there are Indigenous people in leadership and governance roles, as well as in other roles in the school, can instil a sense of belonging among Indigenous students. This point was raised by the older Indigenous students we met. One group stated that while they would like to have more Indigenous teachers at the school, having more teachers of colour would also help them to feel more comfortable at school.

There are a number of ways to actively recruit suitably skilled Indigenous people into the teaching profession. For example, teachers with language or cultural competence can be recruited and recognised through active selection and remuneration systems.

To support strong retention rates, Indigenous school leaders and teachers can be supported to remain in teaching through the use of mentors, networks and other support systems. In addition, school leaders may need to actively manage the workload of Indigenous teachers to prevent them being overburdened with the responsibilities of non-Indigenous teachers for Indigenous students. For example, Indigenous teachers may be asked to liaise with all Indigenous parents, rather than just the parents of students the Indigenous teacher teaches. Where workload pressures are not managed effectively, Indigenous teachers may not remain in teaching, and their experiences may make it more difficult to recruit further Indigenous teachers.

At the governance level, some school boards have designated Indigenous representation to ensure there is an Indigenous perspective at this level. An elementary school in Alberta increased the size of its Parent Council, to encourage greater involvement and input from Indigenous parents.

Involvement of Indigenous students' families with the school

Families that are positively engaged with their children's school are likely to encourage their children to attend school and engage constructively in school activities. Thus, creating inviting and welcoming environments for Indigenous families is important, as are active engagement policies that reach out to the community and provide opportunities for parents, other family members and the community to engage with the school, both on and off school grounds.

A school we visited in Alberta holds family nights throughout the year. Families meet with school staff over a meal at the school, and there is generally an Indigenous speaker. These are well attended and help to build a bridge between the school and students' families. Another school in Alberta also holds regular dinners for families and offers education programmes for parents in areas such as numeracy.

One principal we met provided an alarm clock to every child in the school. She commented that morning routines are not always well established, as parents in the community are often not in paid employment. The alarm clocks provided a way for her to talk to students and their families about the importance of punctuality, and also gave the students and their families a way to address this issue, which we understand it has done.

Roles for Elders within the school

The use of Elders in schools, as teachers, guides and mentors for students and teachers, is a further way to respect Indigenous peoples and their cultures and to provide opportunities for relevant learning for Indigenous students. In our field visits, we visited a number of schools that have Elders involved in teaching and guiding roles within schools and, in some cases, we were able to interview these Elders.

While there are clear benefits for students, relationships between schools and Elders also build staff capability and develop stronger links between the school and the local community.

Professional development for teachers and school leaders

To achieve classroom environments that honour Indigenous students' cultures, languages, world views and knowledge, teachers (most of whom are not Indigenous) need opportunities to develop their capabilities in relation to these areas. Having this capability development as an expectation and part of initial teacher education is essential, in addition to ongoing professional learning and development for teachers and school leaders.

In particular, teachers should have access to professional development opportunities to improve their knowledge and appreciation of the local community's historical, cultural and social context. Without this, they will struggle to provide localised, relevant curriculum for all of their students. The Northwest Territories addresses this through a three-day programme for new teachers, including one full day for an intensive awareness workshop on the history and legacy of residential schools.

Assessing how well teachers are prepared to teach Indigenous curriculum content can be done through teacher questionnaires. An example from Alberta is adding tailored questions on teacher preparedness in relation to Indigenous content to the Teaching and Learning International Survey, an international survey of teachers run by the OECD.

Providing Indigenous support workers within and/or across schools

Dedicated Indigenous advisory or support workers are a further means to provide support and guidance to students, teachers and school leaders. In the field visits, we saw two models of Indigenous support workers, one that involves working within a single school and the other that involves working across a number of schools.

Indigenous support workers within schools tend to monitor and support individual Indigenous students and their classroom teachers. They may have a particular focus on tracking and helping Indigenous students to attend and engage in school activities every day. They may also work directly with teachers on their teaching strategies and practices, and lead improvements in the curriculum and learning activities. They are often a connecting point with Indigenous parents and can lead whole-of-school activities to build cultural competencies.

Indigenous support workers who focus across schools interface more with school leadership than with individual students or teachers. Their role is often to incentivise and support school leaders to improve conditions for Indigenous students. This means, for example, helping school leaders to consciously track the engagement and progress of Indigenous students, and to identify and effectively address any barriers to learning that arise.

Both types of support workers intervene and advocate for individual students when there are high-stakes decisions, such as suspensions, and where they believe there is racist behaviour by teachers against Indigenous students. An example of the latter we were alerted to was an inspection of Indigenous students' school uniforms when they stepped off the bus from the local reserve when it arrived at the school. The inspections were apparently undertaken in full view of all students. Because of the efforts of an Indigenous support worker and two Indigenous staff at the school, this negative practice was stopped.

Re-engagement programmes for students who disengage or drop out of school

Truancy services can be used in a highly active and positive way to identify why students are disengaging from school and what is needed to get them back on track. Noticing early that students are not attending and taking action to resolve this and any underlying issues send a message to students that they are valued.

The establishment of an Individualised Learning Centre in Yukon is helping students who have disengaged or dropped out to continue with their studies. The Centre provides students with a range of programmes that will enable them to graduate. Learning is self-paced, and students receive individualised support from teachers and support workers.

An example of a re-engagement programme from Australia is the Big Picture programme, designed in the United States. The programme is designed for students who are at high risk of leaving school prior to completing Grade 12. The programme works with home-group classes of 12-15 students. Individual learning plans, prepared collaboratively with each of the students, their parents and teachers, are based on the student's personal interest and passions. Mentoring relationships are established to support all students on a regular basis. Students also undertake workplace internships (Doyle and Hill, 2008).

Notes

1. Headcount of students who have been withdrawn or permanently/removed from school.
2. (The act of) forcing someone, or being forced, to leave a school (Cambridge Dictionary).
3. The act of not allowing someone to go to school (Cambridge Dictionary).
4. A punishment in which a person is temporarily not allowed to go to school (Cambridge Dictionary).
5. For further information, see: www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/crosscurriculumpriorities/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-histories-and-cultures/overview
6. For a video and further information, see: https://nac-cna.ca/en/ritajoesong/gentle-warrior.
7. For further information, see: www.nzqa.govt.nz/qualifications-standards/qualifications/ncea/understanding-ncea/how-ncea-works/.

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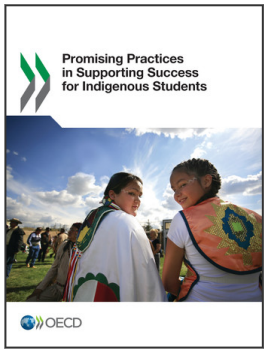

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