

**School Disengagement among Refugee and Migrant Youth
in South East Melbourne**

Findings Report

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1. Introduction

This report will provide an overview of the results and recommendations from a local research project undertaken to increase understanding of school disengagement in young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in South East Melbourne.

The objectives of the report are as follows:

- Increase understanding of how educational disengagement is experienced in young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, including the identification of risk and protective factors unique to multicultural youth.
- Support and inform effective, evidence-informed, and culturally responsive interventions to support local services and schools to prevent and address disengagement for refugee and migrant young people.

The findings and recommendations contained within this report are informed by a literature review, data report, and research-based activities conducted over a nine-month period. The project team recognise and appreciate the diversity of experiences relating to school disengagement within refugee and migrant young people in Melbourne's South East, and that the views expressed within this report may not reflect the experience of every young person with a refugee or migrant background. Concerted efforts have also been made to avoid generalisations or statements relating to specific or prominent cultural or ethnic groups within Melbourne's South East.

Enliven Victoria would also like to thank the local young people, parents, and professionals who have contributed to this report.

2. Background

This section provides context to the origins of the research project, including an overview of project activities, funding, and key stakeholders.

2.1 Project overview

Enliven Victoria was contracted by Eastern Access Community Health (EACH) in 2020 to undertake this project in response to reports of high levels of complex educational disengagement within refugee and migrant youth in South East Melbourne. These observations have been recorded by mental health clinicians from the BounceBack program and headspace centres (Dandenong and Narre Warren) who work closely with local students and schools within the City of Greater Dandenong, City of Casey, and Cardinia Shire local government areas. The BounceBack program assists young people aged 12 – 25 years who are experiencing severe and complex mental health difficulties which require a flexible and medium-term service within a primary care setting.

Enliven undertook a series of research-based activities to establish an understanding of the local issue of school disengagement within refugee and migrant youth. This involved a rapid review of literature, collating local data and conducting interviews, focus groups and surveys (with young people, their families and school staff). A series of recommendations have been developed based upon the findings of these scoping activities, to inform future planning to address educational disengagement in South East Melbourne.

2.2 Project stakeholders

This project was funded by EACH, through commissioned funding from the South East Melbourne Primary Health Network (SEMPHN). Below is a description of the key project stakeholders.

EACH

EACH provides an integrated range of health, disability, counselling and mental health services across Australia. EACH is the lead agency in the coordination of two local headspace sites at Dandenong and Narre Warren, in Victoria. Headspace provides a range of youth-friendly health and support services that assist young people with general health, mental health, education, employment, alcohol and other drugs, and other services. Designated EACH and headspace management staff provided advisory and engagement support to enliven's project staff for the duration of the project.

Enliven Victoria

Enliven Victoria (enliven) is a Primary Care Partnership and not-for-profit organisation based within the City of Greater Dandenong, City of Casey and Cardinia Shire local government areas. Enliven has an extensive history in working to support and build the capacity of refugee, asylum seeker and migrant communities. Enliven project staff led the project planning and implementation, with consultation and strategic direction provided by staff from EACH where appropriate.

3. Methods

3.1 Design and sample

The current research project was guided by a mixed methods approach. The data collection process consisted of five phases across a timeframe of five months using various measures to obtain qualitative and quantitative data. See Figure 1 for a summary of data collection.

Prior to data collection, the research team conducted a thorough review of literature and data surrounding school disengagement in Australia, specifically among students with a refugee and migrant background in South East Melbourne. The objective of the literature review was to increase stakeholder understanding of the prevalence and trends of local disengagement within Melbourne’s South East region. It examines the effectiveness of school and community-based interventions that seek to address school disengagement and presents a series of recommendations and opportunities for further action on this issue. The findings from the literature review were utilised to inform subsequent phases of data collection in terms of developing interview and focus group topic guides.

The study employed a purposeful sampling strategy, in particular convenience sampling. This technique was chosen for its value in capturing and describing a wide range of perspectives. Three population groups were chosen to be included in this study; stakeholders, young people and parents/carers. Eligibility criteria for each cohort were applied to enhance credibility (see Table 1). The total sample consisted of six stakeholders, 27 young people and 17 parents/carers.

Table 1. Exclusion and inclusion criteria for study participants

| Cohort | Inclusion criteria | Exclusion |
|---|---|---|
| Stakeholders <i>(Includes school support staff, school wellbeing staff, mental health clinicians)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Works externally or internally to school • Working with students of a refugee or migrant background • Works within the City of Greater Dandenong, City of Casey or Cardinia Shire | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not have prior knowledge of school disengagement |
| Young Person | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aged 12 – 18 years old (inc.) • Have a migrant or refugee background (if born in Australia, parents must have been born overseas) • Attends school in City of Greater Dandenong, City of Casey or Cardinia Shire • Able to receive consent from guardian (if under 18 years old) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not speak English • Does not have access to technology for online video interview |

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| Parents and Carers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Born overseas • Be a parent, grandparent or carer of a student who is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enrolled in Year 7-12 - Attends school in City of Greater Dandenong, City of Casey or Cardinia Shire - Currently or has recently disengaged from school | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not speak English • Does not have access to technology for online video interview |
|---------------------------|--|---|

Key stakeholders were identified using existing contact lists of enliven and EACH. Concerted efforts were made to recruit a diverse range of professionals working in the field to ensure the data gathered was rich and insightful. Invitations took place via email for an interview (via phone or video call).

Recruitment for parents/carers and young people consisted of disseminating invites via email to school staff, school support services and other relevant networks who assisted with dissemination, as well as via social media and online newsletters. Monetary incentives (electronic vouchers) were used to help assist in recruiting parents/carers and young people.

Once all participants responded with an interest to be part of the research study, a copy of the Consent Form and Plain Language Statement (PLS) was sent to them. The PLS clearly outlined the aim of the study and what the data collection involved including interviews and focus groups being audio recorded.

3.2 Data collection

Data collection occurred over a seven-month period (Figure 1). A number of phases and strategies were implemented, adapted and refined to account for environmental factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, remote learnings, and school holiday periods.

Figure 1. Summary of data collection



3.2.1 Professionals (key stakeholder interviews)

Data collection from stakeholders/school staff involved a one-on-one phone interview with one member of the research team. Interviews had a duration of 30-60 minutes and were audio recorded. The interview strategy employed yielded greater depth of knowledge into the risk factors of school disengagement from the perspective of school staff and possible avenues for intervention. The interview began with a broad question such as “What are your main areas of work in the field of school disengagement and/or youth support?”. Subsequently, a predetermined semi-structured set of questions was asked whilst the researcher used prompts to clarify or elaborate discussions (see Appendix 1 for interview topic guide).

3.2.2 Young people, parents and carers

The first attempt to recruit young people and parents/carers, included invitations to participate in online focus groups. A monetary incentive included a \$50 GiftPay voucher for each participant. This first phase of recruitment was successful in recruiting one parent and two young people. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the parent via video call with one member of the research team. The interview had a duration of 30-60 minutes and was audio recorded. The interview gave depth to the perspective of a parent around risk and protective factors to school disengagement, the role of the school, community and family in their child’s education and possible avenues for further support for parents with a refugee and migrant background. An online focus group was conducted with the two young people and two members of the research team. Participants were asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards their school, family and broader community as well as protective factors to school disengagement.

The second phase of recruitment for an online focus group was unsuccessful. The third phase of recruitment involved a change of approach where interviews were offered rather than focus groups. It was hoped that this would remove any uncertainty or stigma that participants may feel about discussing this topic as a group or with other people. However, recruitment was again unsuccessful.

A short survey was then developed, one tailored to young people and the other towards parents/carers. Each survey took approximately 5 minutes to complete and consisted of open and closed-ended responses that explored themes of protective and risk factors to school disengagement and possible avenues for intervention. A monetary incentive was used where three young people and three parents/carers were randomly selected to receive a \$150 GiftPay voucher. The survey was opened for a month’s duration. A total of 25 young people and 16 parents responded to the online survey.

3.3 Data Analysis

The audio recordings of interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim by members of the research team, with pseudonyms assigned. Transcriptions were uploaded on a password protected

computer. Transcripts were then analysed using thematic analysis methods which involved identifying, analysing, and reporting emerging codes from the data that then become themes and categories for analysis. Investigator triangulation was then implemented throughout data analysis to ensure rigour. This involved the use of all researchers interpreting separate transcriptions and then undertaking cross-checking and corroboration. Finally, a deductive process was used to inform recommendations for further action and research (see Section 5).

4. Findings

The following section provides detail of themes, key risk and protective factors identified throughout the study. It is important to note that the factors that are specific to multicultural young people and their families have been chosen to be elaborated upon. Whilst the factors discussed below may not be the most common nor problematic risk factors, they are factors that should be considered when understanding the unique and complex issues surrounding school disengagement among multicultural youth.

4.1 Risk factors to school disengagement

Table 2 identifies all risk factors that were mentioned throughout the data collection process. The research team categorised these factors (and protective factors, see Table 3) into three levels: ‘family and community’, ‘school’ and at a ‘young person’ level (individual). Those factors that may be specific or more prevalent among young people and families with a refugee and/or migrant background were identified and discussed below (see Table 2).

Table 2. Identifiable risk factors

| | Family/Community | School | Individual |
|---|--|--|---|
| <i>Risk factors (general)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low parent education • Poor parent-child relationships • Poor parent-school relationships • Stigma around accessing support • Parent mental health | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low sense of connection with school • Confidentiality from school staff • Mental illness • Trauma • Risk-taking behaviour • Bullying • Peer pressure • Mental health literacy • LGBTIQ+ • Body dysmorphia • Disability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor student-teacher relationships • Disengaged or non-attentive teachers and staff • Low awareness of early signs or risk factors of disengagement • Counter intuitive consequences for disengaged students • Limited staff resources and capacity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of experience & training - funding constraints |
| <i>Risk factors (specific to multicultural youth and families)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family cultural expectations • ICD (intergenerational cultural dissonance) • Lack of understanding of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Australian school system | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low levels of help-seeking behaviour (academic & mental health/wellbeing) due to cultural stigma • Prior disengagement in schools in country of origin • Interruptions to schooling • Racism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor engagement / communication with parents with language background other than English (LBOTE) • Low levels of cultural safe and appropriate environments |

| | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Role in young people’s school engagement • Mistrust of services & government systems • Language/literacy barriers • Low mental health literacy • Transport • Intergenerational poverty • Family violence • Trauma • Access to interpreters | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of cultural identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racism • Low school cohesion / intercultural cohesion |
|--|--|---|--|

4.1.1 Family and Community

Families and communities play a highly influential role in a young person’s engagement with school. Within migrant and refugee families and communities, there are many dynamics that can present as both risk and protective factors.

Familial and cultural expectations

The impact that parents’ and the broader family circle have upon a child’s level of school engagement was found to be considerable. Specifically, certain familial expectations were found to be a major risk factor to school disengagement, particularly prevalent among families with a refugee and migrant background. Due to a number of cultural norms and contexts, young people are often found to be expected to take on roles and responsibilities outside of school such as caring for sibling or elderly family members, take on home duties (particularly among females), leave school to earn money, and in some instances, early marriage for young girls. Adherence to strong cultural norms which prioritise family over education can significantly reduce a student’s ability to actively engage in at school with considerable amount of pressure and expectations occurring beyond the school environment, as summarised by the following participants;

“...in other cultural groups there is almost pressure from the parents to leave school and go and get work and money to contribute to the family. And then in other cultural groups it’s more gendered. So then there’s pressure like, for women to be married or take on home duties and for the boys to be money earners.” [Professional 5, South East Melbourne]

“There also becomes other options for students at that age because they can, they’re old enough to be working. And they’re sort of seeing as young adults within their

community by that point, so are old enough to be contributing more to families, income within families, but also sibling younger sibling caring responsibilities as well.”
[Professional 1, City of Casey]

Additionally, findings from stakeholder interviews indicated that parents from refugee and migrant background can often place higher than usual expectations upon the school for their child’s successes. Participants attributed these unrealistic expectations to the parents’ misunderstandings of their role in their child’s success at school. These expectations put upon the school staff by parents may be caused by limitations in understanding of the education system, or a lack of awareness of the role of parents in supporting their child’s engagement.

Language and literacy barriers

It was found that many parents do not understand their role in school engagement among young people. This may be attributed to low levels of English proficiency and literacy barriers among refugee and migrant parents. Low levels of functional literacy or educational attainment within parents or carers may contribute to parents’ lack of understanding of the Australian school system. Therefore, this misunderstanding of the school having greatest responsibility in keeping their child engaged at school, may cause conflict, and create unhealthy relationships and communication breakdowns between the school, family, and young person. The following participant describes this lack of understanding of the Australian school system;

“...some parents you know they haven't grown up here, they don't understand the system, or not that they don't understand the system, they just aren't familiar with it...to be able to fully grasp what students need out of parents in the school system.”
[Professional 2, City of Casey]

Literacy or language barriers can also impact the parent’s ability to assist students with homework and reinforce what is being taught at school. Additionally, some parents experience challenges in reading and understanding the communication they receive from the school (e.g., emails, newsletters etc.). It was also found that households that do not speak English at home can significantly impact young people, as described by the following participant;

“...English, it's not spoken in the home and there's a real emphasis on maintaining both languages. So that means that those students are starting secondary school with significant language challenges.” [Professional 1, City of Casey]

According to participants, low levels of literacy, limited knowledge of rights or negative experiences in their country of origin can lead to a mistrust of services or government systems among parents. Fear

of reprisal and visa concerns can contribute to the reluctance of seeking support when a child has disengaged from education. These families also feel they cannot advocate for their child due to the mistrust of these systems. This may have a negative effect on parents as they feel they cannot confide in the school or other support services.

“...the specific challenge for refugee families, particularly, is often about a fear that their refugee status will be revoked if they aren't conforming to boundaries, and there's a greater level, I think, of mistrust of system service systems and governmental systems. ...Parents struggle a lot more in advocating strongly on behalf of their children because of a fear of reprisal. And so I think that certainly language again factors heavily into that.” [Professional 6, South East Melbourne]

Furthermore, low English proficiency can often lead to the child becoming an interpreter for the family, thus experiencing another familial expectation that may negatively impact upon their attendance at school, ability to engage with school and mental health.

“...needing to do some chores or errands for their parents who did not have any English language ability at home. ... then the parents had an appointment that the child would need to usually accompany them to be able to translate somewhat...” [Professional 3, City of Greater Dandenong]

4.1.2 Young people

Poor mental health

A prominent risk factor for school disengagement at an individual level is poor mental health and mental illness. Many determinants that participants attributed to poor mental health among young people included risk-taking behaviours, bullying, low mental health literacy, disability, and body dysmorphia. Concerningly, racism was also identified as a contributing factor to poor mental health particularly among young people with a refugee and migrant background, as described by the following participant;

“...there's an additional element of racism, you know, sort of systemic and structural racism, but also, you know some isolated instances of racism that they experience which adds to that disengagement, which has been kind of a bit of a trigger for disengagement for some of our students in that community.” [Professional 1, City of Casey]

Another factor that may be contributing to poor mental health and therefore low school engagement levels among this cohort is lack of identity and intergenerational cultural dissonance. The majority of young people that participated in this study were born in Australia, with their parents born overseas.

In this instance, parents born overseas may have a stronger identity and attachment to their culture and birth country than their child. This creates unique challenges for young people as they experience a strong culture at home which may be very different to the culture experienced in the classroom or in the community. This cultural dissonance, in conjunction with other mental health challenges young people experience, poses extremely unique challenges for young people with a refugee and a migrant background. It was found that differing cultures between home and the school environment can inhibit young people's ability to embrace or connect with Australian culture, as described by a participant;

"We should let our kids grown up with the Aussie culture because that is the country, they have to know everything. If we keep them in the [country] culture, it is really hard for them when they go out to reality." [Parent 1, CGD]

Young people who are 'stuck' between cultures may experience conflict and communication issues with parents and family. In conjunction with other risk factors such as familial expectations, cultural norms, language barriers and parents' lack of understanding of the school system; this may create a disconnect between parent and child. Consequently, the conflict and communication issues may either exacerbate or conceal challenges the young person may be facing at school.

Stigma

Stigma was also found to play a role in school engagement levels, particularly for young people wanting to access further academic or mental health support. This may contribute to low levels of help-seeking behaviours that may be able to prevent disengagement or promote re-engagement, such as accessing further academic assistance or mental health support.

"I know a lot of students that don't go to after school classes or don't want to be seen in after school classes because, I don't know, other students will judge." [Young person 2, CGD]

"...I ask [school teacher] to check if we got any counsellor at school to see my son. But my son said no mum, I don't want to go because my groups said what is wrong with me. For this I don't want to go." [Parent 1, CGD]

Migration and resettlement

Young people with prior disengagement in schools from their country of origin, or disruptions to schooling as a result of migration, was also mentioned as contributing or risk factor to school disengagement. Trauma catalysed by the migration process was also reported as negatively impacting young people's engagement with schooling.

Socio-economic disadvantage

Another risk factor prevalent among refugee and migrant youth that was identified in this research were socio-ecological determinants such income. Instances of low school attendance can be a result of transport limitations to get to school. This may be due to parents not having a license, vehicle, a reliance on public transport, or low family income. Financial pressures placed upon families without employment or eligibility for government support may also lead to pressure placed on young people to prioritise income over educational attainment.

4.1.3 Schools

Schools and school environments can play a profound role in influencing the engagement of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. The following themes emerged as significant issues in contributing to school disengagement.

Limited awareness of early signs and risk factors of school disengagement

Professionals commonly identified that many schools across the region are not identifying early signs of disengagement. As a result, intervention is limited at the initial stages of disengagement which creates a missed opportunity for early intervention and prevention.

“But what we found is they [schools] are not great at cluing them onto us when the first signs of disengagement happen. It's almost like it's not important enough yet” [Professional 4, South East Melbourne]

In broad terms, it was found that many schools tend to focus on school attendance as the main marker for disengagement, with other levels of school disengagement being overlooked such as low attention, withdrawn behaviour and avoiding challenges.

Additionally, according to some participants, a common intervention type used by schools to address disengagement is suspension or banning from particular activities. Some participants believed that excluding students from school is rarely the most effective disciplinary response, as it overlooks the causes of disengagement and often increases the likelihood of being involved in anti-social and risk-taking behaviour. Participants believed staff need to become more educated about the determinants of disengaged behaviour of students, particularly those with a refugee and migrant background. For example, disruptive behaviour, non-attendance and low achievement rates are often associated with family conflict, mental illness, and learning difficulties.

Staff capacity, resource and funding limitations

Limited school and staff capacity may contribute to limitations to accurately identify early signs of disengagement. Participants described situations whereby wellbeing staff are often teaching or school staff who take on an additional role to support student wellbeing. As a result, these staff are more likely to lack adequate skills and training in identifying disengagement and addressing issues among

young people that can be additional complex for students with a refugee and migrant background.

Participants also mentioned that many schools tend to not seek support from external services to address issues surrounding school disengagement. This may be due to a number of reasons, such as lack of staff capacity or knowledge to identify school disengagement issues, or cost and workload barriers. Another perspective which may explain a lack of action from schools to address issues of school disengagement, is summarised by the following participant;

“... I haven't had the school say to me, ‘look our cultural and linguistically diverse students are the ones that really need that support... perhaps maybe the needs of the culturally and linguistically diverse students are perhaps overlooked. ...maybe they're the quietest students.” [Professional 2, City of Casey]

When underlying issues to school disengagement (e.g., mental illness or family violence) are effectively and quickly addressed, students may be more likely to re-engage. However, professionals note that often by the time they receive the referral and become aware of these concerns, the issues experienced by the young person are already quite entrenched and finding a successful way to address them becomes more challenging.

Ineffective parent-school communication

The relationship with parents and school staff plays an important role in keeping young people engaged in school. However, it was demonstrated by participants that communication and engagement with parents (particularly those who were not born in Australia or have low English proficiency) can often be low, and significant efforts need to be made to address this.

Limited or ineffective communication may be due to low cross-cultural communication skills, or a lack of understanding by school staff of the unique barriers and challenges families with a migrant and refugee background experience. Participants indicated that the parent of refugee and migrant youth are often the hardest to contact, therefore staff tend to perceive the lack of communication from parents as not caring about their children's education. In contrast to these assumptions, the underlying cause may be due to language barriers or low digital literacy or access. This scenario can create an unhealthy relationship between the school and the parents, where parents begin to develop negative connotation towards schools. The following participant summarises the lack of connection between some schools and multicultural families;

“Some schools are really good at being able to bring communities together in the face of, you know, not being able to communicate as easily not being able to have children feel connected, they're really good at focusing on that. Whereas some other schools may, not because that is not their priority, but just perhaps that's something they overlook. So, I think it would depend on... some schools are really great because,

they realize yes, we've got so many different cultures. We need a way to be able to filter through all of our messages to all families because they're all part of our community, whereas I think some schools are still finding their feet when it comes to that." [Professional 2, City of Casey]

School environments that do not support diversity or intercultural connection

Schools that lacked cohesion, connection and cultural safety were found to be another risk factor to school disengagement levels. Participants highlighted that many school environments are not culturally cohesive nor well trained to address the multiple, complex barriers to learning that migrant and refugee young people face. Local schools and staff need to have a greater understanding of the unique difficulties these students face in order to improve their engagement in school. Low intercultural or school cohesion can exacerbate racism and stigma that young students already experience, thereby negatively impacting students' cultural and self-identity, causing a range of mental health issues.

The social identity of students as refugees and 'visible migrants' can be a course of discrimination from teachers which was an issue discussed in stakeholder interviews. Teachers can become less inclined to recognise their strengths and abilities and offer them support and motivation. Participants mentioned that *"a significant amount of racism"* has been *"a trigger for disengagement for some of our students in that community"* [Professional 1, City of Casey]. Systemic racism among staff and the broader school system was summarised by the following participant;

"You know, so we have quite an ethnically diverse teaching and just general self however, we are still in an area that is predominantly white and is racist. And so there's some other structural and systemic kind of barriers that get in the way. And, you know, teachers also can have their own strong opinions about different communities and different students, that some students and some communities are just lazy. Even a single kind of comment like that can really set back other programs and initiatives that you're trying to do." [Professional 1, City of Casey]

Racism within the school environment (from peers and staff) can result in students expressing distrust due to perceived lack of support and cultural understanding, thereby becoming less motivated to seek support and actively participate in school. Perceptions surrounding concerns about confidentiality was expressed by one of the students, as they felt afraid that their teachers will talk amongst themselves if a student opens up to them about their struggles;

"But sometimes teachers tell each other. So confidentiality is a bit of an issue."
[Young person 1, CGD]

Students who experience racism or discrimination are more likely to have lower self-esteem and develop negative feelings towards their ethnicity, faith and/or culture. This may impact on the student’s relationship with their family and sense of belonging in their community. Furthermore, these negative feelings can lead to unhealthy and risk-taking behaviours such as alcohol and drug use, thus ultimately contributing to poor mental and physical health and engagement with school.

4.2 Protective factors to school disengagement

A number of protective factors were identified by participants to reduce levels of disengagement and/or promote re-engagement at school for young people. See Table 3 for a summary of protective factors.

Table 3. Identifiable protective factors

| | Family/Community | School | Individual |
|---|---|---|--|
| <i>Protective factors (general)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role models from community • Larger families (more points of connection with family, siblings, and parents) • Families that prioritise education (e.g., offer tutoring, home to help with homework) • Families that understand and prioritise mental health • Strong structural authority within families | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong and understanding relationships between school staff, wellbeing staff, principals, and students (at least one point of connection) • Staff mentors for students (that aren’t involved in the discipline) • Strong communication/ “partnerships” between parents and schools • Youth workers based in schools • Extra-curricular activities (e.g., sport, after-school clubs) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High student aspiration and self-efficacy, confidence, belief in self, sense of agency • Student connectedness to school • Strong peer connections |
| <i>Protective factors (specific to multicultural youth and families)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family connections to support agencies (financial, social or health support) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culturally safe environments that celebrate diversity • Schools that are responsive to parent communication needs and level of understanding • Offering Multicultural Educational Aides | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connections to culture and community • Having peers of same religion, something to bond over, same values • Access to English Language school |

4.2.1 Family and community

Parents and families who are connected with a range of support agencies

Findings suggest that students with parents and families who have access to and are connected with a range of support services and agencies, are more likely to experience higher levels of engagement at school.

The support for parents ensures they are equipped with the knowledge and understanding of the unique challenges their child faces in and outside of school, including mental health issues. Increased parental understanding and support around the importance of education and the role of parents within the Australian school system can help to build parents' capacity to minimise risk factors and address early signs of disengagement within a home setting to then seek further support. The support provides them with a sense of agency and voice and provides them a pathway to contribute to their child's success in a productive way. Better outcomes (across all measures) are achieved when families are linked to family clinicians/support, as compared to if just the young person is linked to a clinician/support service, as indicated by the following participant;

"We [service] have collected data on the outcomes, especially around school attendance, depression and anxiety. The outcomes for young people when parents are linked with the family clinicians versus when parents aren't linked to the family clinician...there is across the board improvement in all outcomes when young people's parents are linked to the family clinician at the same time." [Professional 4, South East Melbourne]

4.2.2 Young People

Strong peer connections

Friends or peer support groups were found to be a very common protective factor in school engagement among young people. As observed in the focus group and survey data collected from young people, 'friends' was the top response towards supporting school engagement. Fostering peer connections, particularly those that share the same religion or cultural values was found to be particularly beneficial in providing a supportive social environment and a source of emotional support in times of isolation.

Mentoring and teacher support

The presence of supportive teachers and staff were also highly ranked as top protective factors that support school engagement in both surveys and focus groups completed by young people. Students indicated the need for "more support at school so that students feel like they can ask teachers for help" [Young person 2, City of Greater Dandenong]. According to participants, students who have access to adequate support such as qualified wellbeing staff, psychologists, counsellors, and youth workers are more likely to be engaged in school. However more support is necessary, such as interventions and programs that provide one-on-one mentoring. Being able to access one-on-one

support, outside of the classroom was highly valued by young people we interviewed, as demonstrated by the following participant;

“Some of my teachers that I do like are willing to help me after school or after classes. And some teachers aren't like willing to do that. So the ones that do, obviously the students feel more comfortable with, you know, because they [teachers] are putting the effort in and you are as well.” [Young person 2, CGD]

Extra-curricular activities

Extra-curricular activities, in particular sport, may confer a range of mental and physical health benefits and may act as a critical mediator for achieving positive settlement and engaging in Australian culture. These activities can create opportunities to learn new skills and worth ethics that they can transfer and apply to other settings. Barriers such as transport, cost and uniforms can limit access to these activities, particularly among refugee and migrant youth, and should be considered by schools and services when implementing extra-curricular programs.

4.2.3 Schools

Teacher-parent relationship

As noted in the previous section, parents and families are instrumental in supporting the engagement of children in school. Schools that are responsive to and understanding of parents' needs contributed to keeping students engaged in their education according to participants. As described by a participant;

“If you can't get the parents involved, then it's difficult to get the student involved as well.” [Professional 2, City of Casey]

Participants noted that targeted parental engagement and establishing open communication lines between schools and parents can help alleviate family pressures and conflict that contribute to disengagement among refugee and migrant students. Working collaboratively with parents and understanding the challenges young people and their parents experience in a home environment may considerably assist a young person's experience in a school environment.

... some schools are really great because, they realize yes, we've got so many different cultures. We need a way to be able to filter through all of our messages to all families 'cause they're all part of our community, whereas I think some schools are still finding their feet when it comes to that.” [Professional 2, City of Casey]

Teacher-student relationships

Good communication and relationship between classroom teachers and wellbeing staff and students was found to be just as important. In some instances, disruptive behaviour in a classroom can leave the teacher feeling disrespected and result in negative relationships between students and teachers, which can then transition to poor teacher-parent relationship. It is important that teachers are able to look beyond the behavioural issues and instead to the factors contributing to disengagement. Data from students indicated the importance to feel comfortable in disclosing personal issues to and create a bond with their teachers.

Access to English language schools and multicultural education aides were also found to positively benefit students with a migrant or refugee background, however not all students have the opportunity to access these programs or services.

4.3 COVID-19 impacts

Participants were asked to comment on the impact that COVID-19 restrictions had upon school disengagement, specifically from remote learning. Table 3 provides a summary of participant responses. Overall, although remote learning did benefit some students, majority of students were negatively affected by the remote online learning environment. Existing challenges were exacerbated with students becoming further disengaged or falling further behind, particularly those who attend English language schools and/or transition programs. Although participants acknowledged there may be higher attendance for some student’s post-remote learning periods due to them becoming more appreciative of the school environment, many challenges still exist and need to be addressed.

Table 4. Impact of COVID-19 on school disengagement

| | |
|--|--|
| Challenges during remote learning periods | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of access to technology and internet was a barrier to engage with online learning. Some students initially had to complete learning on mobiles. • Many students logged on to report attendance but did not complete any work. • Particularly among higher year levels, there was high levels of absenteeism or students completely disengaged in remote learning. • Schools lost visibility on vulnerable students. • Concerns for students of newly arrived families in English Language schools or transition programs. Insufficient access to multicultural aides. • Exacerbates existing issues: more difficult to access support, difficult to re-engage students. • Removal of school as a ‘safe space’ is of concern, particularly if home environment is not safe. • Amplified existing issues within family households, increase of stressors (job loss, lack of income, ineligible for support payments). High level of casual workers within migrant communities. School is not a priority for these families due to decline of standard of living. |
|--|--|

| | |
|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenging for external agencies to continue to implement programs in schools that support engagement. Either not feasible to run program online or the school saw no benefit/value running it online. |
| Benefits of remote learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students with anxiety, social anxiety or low peer connection thrived during remote learning contexts Saw some re-engagement or increased engagement from newly arrived families/transition programs during covid, particularly those that experienced bullying or social anxiety |
| Challenges post-remote learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concern over content and study habits missed from remote-learning period, particularly for students at English Language schools where they are only there for a set period before transitioning to mainstream schools. Increased difficulty to develop strong peer connections, particularly among transition students (prep and year 7) Concern around willingness of families to engage child at school, now they know that school can be done at home, so 'why do I have to send the student'. For children with anxious avoidance of school, absence of exposure may make this worse. Concerns about family violence. Home is not the safest place for all children, and they have now been at home for a long time. Services are anticipating children disclosing what happened to them during the time that school weren't able to pick up on. |

NB: these impacts are applicable to all students, regardless of migrant or refugee background unless otherwise stated.

4.4 Survey Data

The information below relates to data collected through two electronic surveys. A copy of the surveys tool can be found in the Appendices.

4.4.1 Parents and Carers

Respondent demographics

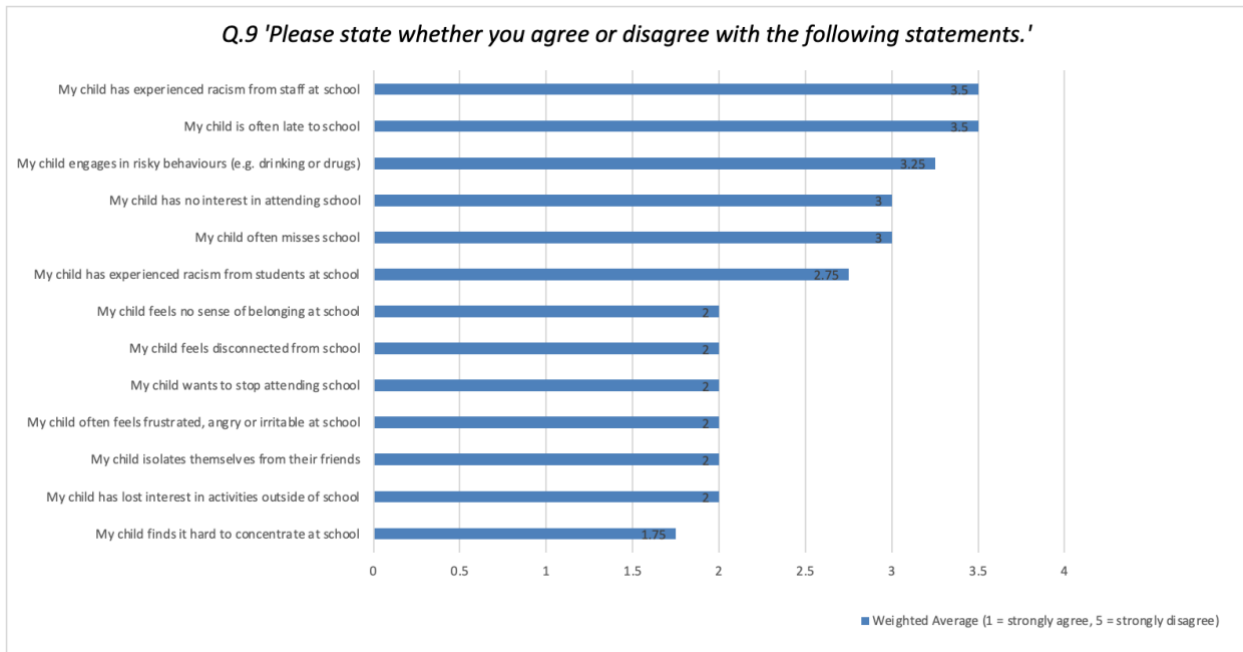
Respondents (n=16) all had a child in their care between the ages of 12 – 17 years old, representing nine different countries of origin and seven language groups. Despite the survey being open to carers, 100% of respondents identified as parents (with 67% identifying as female and 33% identifying as male).

Parent perceptions of school disengagement

Seventy-five percent of respondents reported that they believe their child is disengaged from school. When asked to identify their level of agreeance across a series of statements (representing 13 school disengagement risk factors), there was only one risk factor that no parents reported observing (see

Figure 2).

Figure 2. Parent identified risk factors and signs of school disengagement

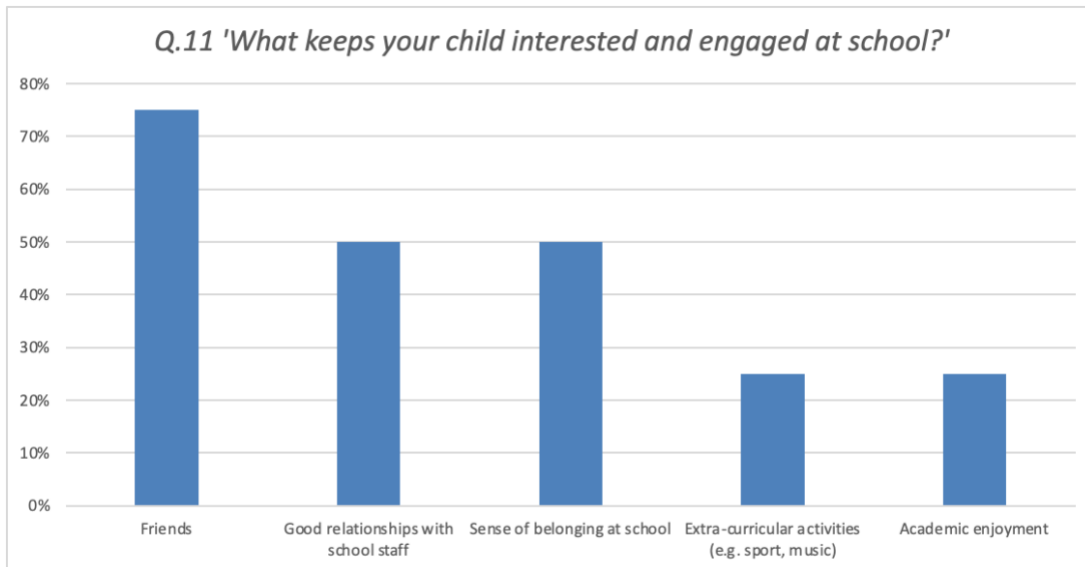


This question highlighted that the most reported risk factors or signs of disengagement included; difficulties in concentrating at school, a low sense of belonging at school, feelings of anger, frustration or irritability at school, low motivation to attend school, isolation from peers, and a loss of interest in activities outside of school. These results indicate that there are often multiple factors or signs that a young person is disengaged or at risk of disengaging. It also highlights the presence of signs that occur at a psychological level, which may be 'invisible' to schools or parents (e.g. not expressed in physical ways such as truancy, lateness or behavioural issues).

Parent perceptions of protective factors to school disengagement

Strong peer relations were identified as a key factor in supporting strong student engagement at school which is consistent with the data from the interviews and focus groups (see Figure 3). Additionally, student relationships with staff and a sense of belonging at school were reported as additional positive factors in promoting school engagement.

Figure 3. Parent identified protective factors for school engagement



When asked what additional school or community-based interventions may support their child’s engagement, parents reported the following:

- One hundred percent (100%) of parents reported that the following factors would help their child remain engaged or increase engagement at school:
 - Access to school-based mental health services.
 - Access to peer support programs.
 - Supportive staff and teachers.
- Seventy-five (75%) of parents reported that the following factors would help their child remain engaged or increase engagement at school:
 - Access to extra-curricular activities.
 - Access to information for parents about school disengagement.
 - Access to information for parents about how to help children who are disengaged.

Parental attitudes and beliefs: Roles and responsibilities regarding school engagement

Parents were asked two questions to ascertain their perceptions of the various roles and responsibilities that a young person's social network play in promoting school engagement.

- Seventy-five percent (75%) of parents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that parents, schools, young people, communities, and faith communities all have a responsibility to keeping young people engaged in school.

- The majority of parents believe that schools are the ‘most responsible’ for keeping young people engaged, followed by parents, the young people themselves, and communities.

These attitudes reflect an awareness and understanding that there are various people, groups and organisations within a young person’s life that can influence school engagement. However, strong beliefs or expectations that schools play the sole, or most significant, role in keeping young people engaged may be problematic in addressing complex social issues such as school disengagement.

4.4.2 Young people

Respondent demographics

Respondents (n=25) were all between the ages of 13 – 19 years and had at least one parent born overseas, representing 14 different countries of origin. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of respondents were themselves born overseas, with the remainder being born in Australia. Approximately 80% of respondents identified as female and 20% identifying as male.

Approximately 52% of respondents attended school in Cardinia Shire, 15% in Greater Dandenong, and 15% in the City of Casey. The remaining 19% attended schools in surrounding local government areas.

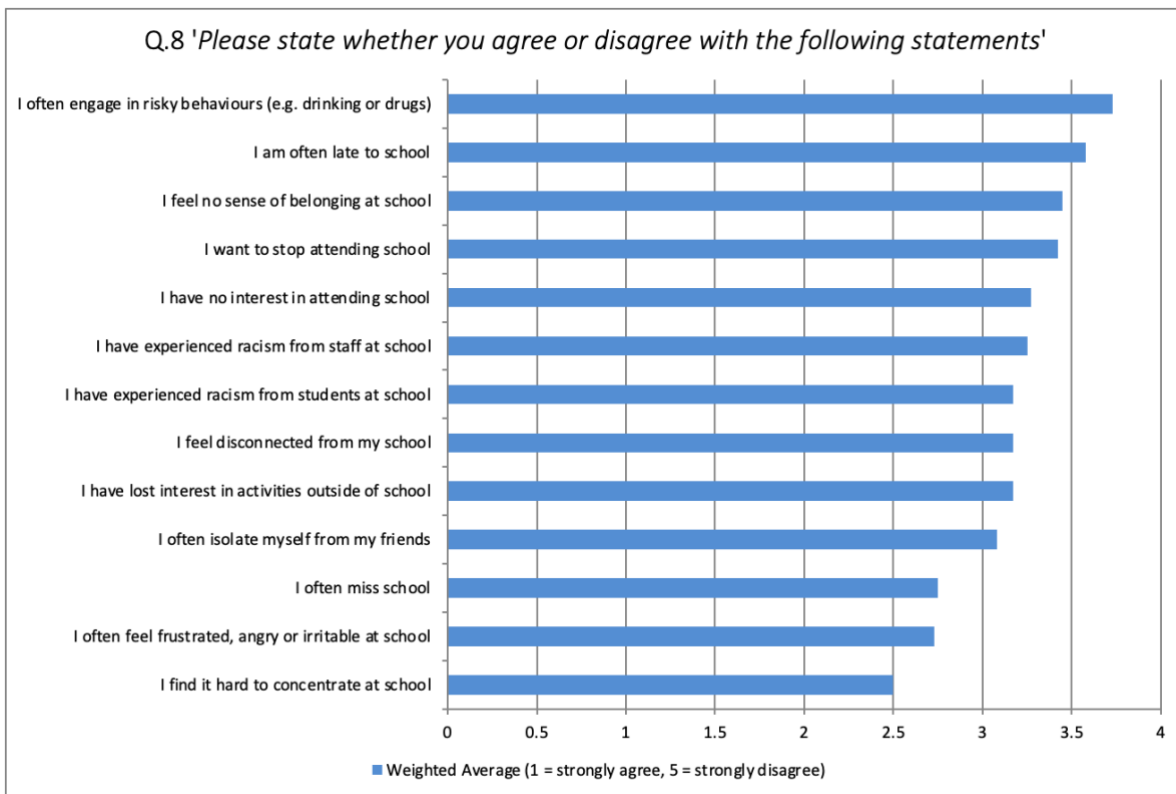
Youth perceptions of school disengagement

Overall, only 25% of respondents identified themselves as being disengaged from school, with a further 28% ‘unsure’ and 58% reporting they were not disengaged from school. Limitations to the accuracy of self-reported disengagement exist due to factors such as low understanding of what constitutes school disengagement, or responder bias.

This data was reflected in another survey question, where young people were asked to rate level of agreeance across a range of statements relating to risk factors or signs of school disengagement. The data indicated that many students did not report behaviours or feelings indicative of school disengagement (see Figure 4).

The most commonly reported risk factors or signs of disengagement included difficulty concentrating at school, feelings of frustration, anger and irritability at school, and often missing school. These results are consistent with findings from the parent survey.

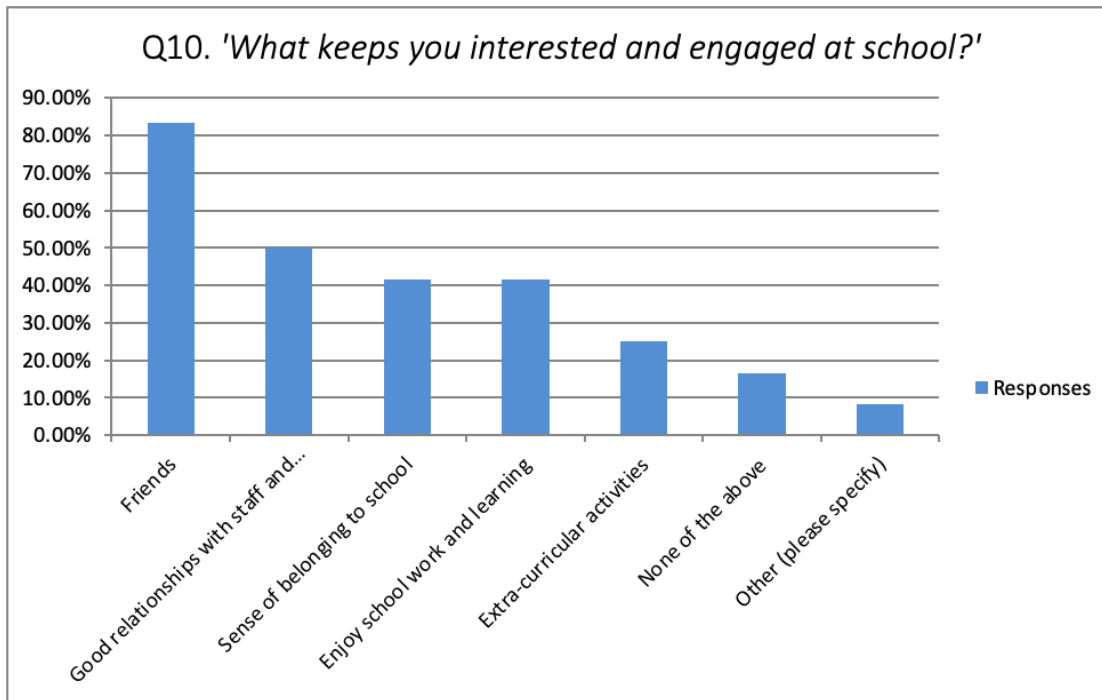
Figure 4. Youth identified risk factors and signs of school disengagement



Youth perceptions of protective factors to school disengagement

Strong peer connections was identified by respondents as being a very significant protective factor in school engagement, with over 80% of young people reporting that 'friends' were what kept them interested at school (see Figure 5). This finding is consistent with data from the parents and carers survey, indicating a strong association between young people, their relationship with their peers, and their level of engagement with school.

Figure 5. Youth identified factors for promoting school engagement



Furthermore, ‘good relationships with staff and teachers’ and ‘sense of belonging to school’ were also identified in both the young people and parent survey as being important factors to levels of interest and engagement with school.

When asked what ideas respondents had to keep young people from refugee and migrant young people engaged in school, there were a range of responses:

“Accommodate for their individual circumstances and to create a safe environment from racism.” [Young person, Cardinia Shire]

“As a refugee myself, I feel as if seeing yourself represented at school can help you become more involved so creating programs where students can learn about each other cultures can reduce the probability of racism and bullying and can help migrant kids feel more represented and appreciated. Also having cultural days where everyone can wear their own cultural clothing, share their cultural foods and do cultural performances can help migrant students feel more comfortable at school.” [Young person, Cardinia Shire]

“Extra-curricular activities.” [Young person, City of Casey]

“Cultural days (already implemented though, but they are great), control of racism, aim to make schools more diverse including teachers, after school tutoring or homework clubs for those who are struggling and need further assistance, actually learn about the world in history

instead of learning about world war 1&2 every single year, it would be nice to be educated about Africa, Middle East, Latin America and Polynesia as the internet also has limited sources on these topics whereas the internet is filled with European information.” [Young person, Cardinia Shire]

“Make them feel like they belong.” [Young person, City of Casey]

Responses represented a range of opinions; however, a dominant theme was the significance of culturally inclusive and safe environments, and school cohesion and connectedness. These insights are particularly relevant to schools in bringing awareness to the importance of school environments that celebrate and promote diversity and inclusion.

Youth attitudes and beliefs: Roles and responsibilities toward school engagement

Young people were also asked the same two questions to ascertain their perceptions of the various roles and responsibilities that their social network plays in promoting school engagement.

- The majority of young people (75%) 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they have a responsibility to keep themselves engaged in school, with only 25% agreeing that their parents have a role to play.
- Thirty-three percent (33%) of young people agreed that communities and faith communities play a role in promoting school engagement.
- The majority of young people believe that they are the 'most responsible' for keeping themselves engaged, followed by schools, parents, and to a lesser extent, communities.

These responses indicate a difference in how parents and young people view the level of responsibility of themselves and others in promoting school engagement. Young people believe they have the most significant role to play in school engagement, in contrast with parents who believe that the school has the most significant responsibility.

Interestingly, young people are also aware of the positive role that their communities and faith communities may be able to play in supporting engagement.

5. Strengths and Limitations

5.1 Strengths

This project had many identifiable strengths. Firstly, the qualitative study design provided a rich description of participants' responses and perspectives. Given the broad spectrum of educational disengagement and the unique experiences of young people from refugee and migrant background, it was pertinent that the data collected reflected this complex issue. It offers diverse perspectives from young people, parents/carers, school staff, and support services which reflects the interdisciplinary response needed to address educational disengagement.

This project contributed to the very limited evidence base. It highlights the need for more empirical research of the unique challenges young people with a refugee and migrant background experience both at school, at home and in the wider community, particularly among Melbourne's South East region.

5.2 Limitations

There are several limitations which may have affected the quality of the study. Due to funding and time constraints, the study was unable to use co-design methods when developing the interview and focus group topic guides and the survey tool. Additionally, as the eligible criteria for parents and carers included '*parent or carer of a student who is currently or has recently disengaged from school*', this was left up to the discretion of the parent/carer as this could not be verified by the research team. This may increase the risk of parents providing misleading or false answers in order to participate. The varying levels of understandings of 'school disengagement' among this cohort can also impact the quality of the sample, thereby impacting the extent to which results can be generalised to the wider population. A small sample size also limits the transferability of findings. Methods of recruitment and modes of data collection had to be adapted throughout the study as the research team found it challenging to engage with the desired cohort. Nevertheless, the data collected does provide some understanding of the topic as a whole and creates a pathway for further research into this area.

6. Recommendations

This section of the report outlines a series of evidence-informed recommendations or ‘potential areas for action’ that may strengthen local responses to school disengagement for refugee and migrant young people in South East Melbourne. The recommendations are informed by analysis of current literature, local data and practice, and the findings of this research project.

School disengagement is a highly complex issue which requires a multifaceted, long-term solution. No single intervention or strategy alone will solve the issue of school disengagement; however, there are a range of interdependencies, or promising areas of action, within the broader system that may positively impact outcomes for refugee and migrant young people in Melbourne’s South East.

The recommendations have been categorised into actions that can be implemented across various levels within the system where social determinants and risk factors for school disengagement may intersect.

6.1 Systems Level

At a policy and systems level, there are a number of areas for action that would help to build a stronger evidence base and robust data monitoring to further advocate for funding, resources and interventions to support schools and services to undertake this work.

Research and Evaluation

Many local programs and interventions exist with primary or secondary focus on promoting student engagement (over 15 cited throughout research project), however few are monitored or evaluated in a way that contributes to a strong evidence base around what works and what doesn’t. A significant gap also remains in the literature around Australian-based interventions, and interventions that are specific to multicultural youth.

a. Invest and increase further research to support evaluations which focus upon the measuring and disseminating the effectiveness of current school disengagement interventions in South East Melbourne.

b. Establishment of a community of practice focussed upon school disengagement (local stakeholders regularly meeting to share outcomes and learnings of school disengagement and re-engagement interventions).

Advocacy

Stronger advocacy efforts are required to push for stronger monitoring and data collection to understand the prevalence and complexity of school disengagement for refugee and migrant young people in South East Melbourne, and more broadly. A more comprehensive, multi-faceted range of disengagement indicators are needed to better understand the complexity and severity of school disengagement.

c. Increase regional advocacy efforts to Department of Education and Training (DET) for robust monitoring and broader data indicators for school disengagement for young people in Victoria (which extend beyond limited proxy measures e.g. school attendance).

d. Increase capacity building opportunities for schools and school staff to confidently use tools and resources to identify and measure disengagement and outcomes, including risk factors for early signs of disengagement.

Multisectoral action

School disengagement cannot be addressed through working with families, schools or DET alone. Collective efforts and a shared agenda are needed from multiple government departments and levels of government (Department of Justice and Community Safety, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, local government etc.), community service organisations (settlement, family services, housing) and health organisations (AOD, mental health etc).

e. Explore opportunities to undertake Group Model Building (GMB) processes and/or applying complex systems thinking approaches may support participatory processes to progress collective shifts in thinking, build consensus, and increase commitment to drive collaborative solutions with a systems lens.

f. Explore opportunities for collective impact methods and tools may provide a more structured approach for multiple stakeholders to effectively address a complex social issue such as school disengagement on a larger scale.

6.2 School and community level

At a community or school-based level, many of the following recommendations aim to take on an early intervention or prevention approach – including engagement with both primary and secondary schools. The majority of these recommendations are also focussed on promoting school environments that are conducive to strong school-parent communication and engagement, strong student-school connections, and culturally safe, inclusive and supportive school environments.

Awareness and Education

Increased awareness is needed at a local and regional level (schools, community service organisations, community leaders, faith leaders etc.) to understand the social and cultural nuances of school disengagement for multicultural youth in Melbourne's South East.

g. Harness and leverage expertise from key local services such as Southern Migrant & Refugee Centre, South East Community Links and Centre for Multicultural Youth to support to facilitate local forums or webinars (which also include the voices of young people) to raise awareness of the challenges and opportunities to support school engagement for multicultural youth.

h. Increase the development and distribution of resources to support community-based organisations and schools to identify risk and protective factors in relation to school disengagement, with an additional emphasis on diversity and inclusion.

Capacity Building

Increased skills, knowledge and tools are needed at a local level (primary schools, secondary schools, and community service organisations) to identify, prevent, and address the risk factors for school disengagement earlier. Early intervention should be a key strategy in preventing school disengagement for multicultural youth, with all staff equipped with a basic level of understanding.

l. Increase or consolidate promotion of existing programs and external supports available to schools who are supporting disengaged students (e.g. resources, local directories, communication materials).

j. Increase the number and diversity of staff who have knowledge and capacity to identify school disengagement in primary and secondary schools, beyond staff in student wellbeing or student support service roles.

Student and parent engagement

Schools should aim to review or develop student engagement policies and programs to ensure they are meeting the needs of multicultural students and families, and building cohesive, connected, and inclusive school environments. Whole-of-school approaches should be taken to promote cultural safety, celebrate diversity, and support and facilitate effective and respectful cross-cultural communication inside and outside the classroom.

k. Development of school-based toolkits, resources, or professional development opportunities to support the development of inclusive and safe school environments and effective cross-cultural engagement strategies.

Access to support

Schools should consider how to improve access to support services and/or programs for students. Considerations should be given to decreasing or removing physical barriers (e.g., whether the service can be accessed at the school), cultural barriers (e.g., whether the services or programs are culturally appropriate), and social barriers (e.g., whether there is stigma or misconceptions around privacy/confidentiality in accessing support services and programs). Considerations should also be given to the types or range of support offered.

l. Increase support to schools or services to undertake consultations within school communities to identify barriers to service accessibility.

Promoting engagement

Local primary and secondary schools should consider prevention programs which promote school engagement and strengthen protective factors. These may include sports, dance or art groups, homework clubs, pastoral care, mentoring programs, leadership programs or events or programs to

celebrate connection to culture and faith.

m. Increase awareness and knowledge within schools about the value of extra-curricular school-based programs and the important role they may play in promoting engagement.

6.3 Parent and Family Level

Through supporting parents, family members or carers who have low literacy, language barriers or poor knowledge of the education system to increase their knowledge and capacity to support young people who may be at risk of disengaging, there is an increased likelihood of early intervention and supporting strong school-parent-student communication and approaches.

Awareness and Education

Increased awareness is needed at a family level (parents, carers, extended families etc.) to build understanding around school disengagement.

n. Workshops, resources, or community education sessions, including topics such as:

- *What is school disengagement?*
- *The role of parents and families in promoting school engagement*
- *Identifying risk factors for disengagement*
- *Identifying protective factors for promoting school engagement*
- *Mental health literacy*
- *How to advocate for a child who is showing early signs of disengagement/ is disengaged*

6.4 Individual and Practitioner/Clinician Level

Mental health practitioners, youth support services and youth workers are well-positioned to support young people's engagement with school, and to prevent or reduce disengagement. Investing in strategies to support culturally responsive and tailored interventions for multicultural youth (at an individual level) will play an important role in consolidating broader efforts to address school disengagement across the region.

Awareness and Education

Positive mental health literacy and strong peer connections emerged as common themes in preventing school disengagement. Students with high mental health literacy with strong help-seeking behaviours are better equipped to advocate and address early signs of mental health concerns or school disengagement for themselves and their peers.

o. Build the knowledge and capacity of young people and/or clients to:

- *Obtain and maintain positive mental health through education or therapeutic approaches.*
- *Enhance help seeking efficacy through school-based or youth-based programs.*

- *Develop strong and healthy peer connections through education or therapeutic approaches.*

Efforts should also support local workforce capacity building. While preventing school disengagement may not be the primary goal of many practitioners or clients in mental health programs or services, a broader awareness of the relationship between mental health and school disengagement may offer opportunities to support interventions that provide co-benefits. Specific focus should also be placed upon bringing awareness to how socio-cultural factors such as migration, resettlement, culture, language, and faith may impact and influence mental health and school engagement.

p. Increase professional development and reflective practice opportunities for practitioners/clinicians to increase their understanding of the intersection between mental health and school disengagement for refugee and migrant young people.

Advocacy

Mental health practitioners working with multicultural young people and their families are in a strong position to advocate for the needs of the young person within school environments, particularly if parents or carers experience barriers or challenges to do this on their own.

q. Build and/or enhance engagement and relationships with local schools and key wellbeing staff to facilitate effective and responsive communication to address concerns regarding disengaged refugee and migrant youth, including support for parents who face barriers to communication.

Community-based approaches

Practitioners/ clinicians who are working with multicultural youth can also play a role in strengthening protective factors to promote school engagement or re-engagement. Findings from both the research project and literature review reinforce the positive connection between engagement in group-based activities and engagement with school.

r. Explore and support community referrals or social prescribing to link young people with school- or community-based programs or activities that support their health and wellbeing e.g., organised sport, dance, arts, youth groups or music.

7. Conclusion

This report provides a significant contribution to efforts in understanding and bringing awareness to the complexity of school disengagement within refugee and migrant youth in Melbourne's South East. Despite this project's limitations, the in-depth data and strong alignment with the existing evidence base provides justification for further exploration and intervention to address the issue of school disengagement.

The findings within this report will be shared broadly and used to inform the development of local and tailored school- and community-based interventions to promote school engagement and school re-engagement. It is hoped that local services, schools, and other key stakeholders will reflect and consider the recommendations put forward within the report as opportunities for effective, evidence-informed action to improve educational outcomes for refugee and migrant youth.

Appendix 1. Topic Guide: Key Stakeholders

Aim: Identify and understand needs of diverse communities and barriers faced by refugee or migrant students.

Background of participant

- What are your main areas of work?
- How long have you been in this role?
- What kind of students do you mainly work with? What is their cultural background?

Challenges and barriers to school youth disengagement

- What are some factors at 'X' level that are *negatively* influencing educational disengagement

Student level

Family level

School/service level

- How do these challenges differentiate from those experienced by non-refugee/migrant students?

Protective factors of school youth disengagement

- What are some factors at 'X' level that are *positively* influencing educational disengagement

Student level

Family level

School/service level

Action areas / possible avenues for intervention

- What is currently being done to address some of these barriers?
 - are these specific to your workplace?
 - are they successful? Why/why not?

Appendix 2. Topic Guide: Parents

Opening question(s):

Tell me a bit about your children, family, and relationship with their school.

- What are some things you think keep your kids engaged and interested in school?
 - Prompt: friendly staff, mentors, events/programs, support from friends
 - Have these things helped your kids in the past?

Role of parent, community in youth school disengagement

- What do you believe your role is as a parent/carer in keeping your child engaged and interested in school?
- What role do you perceive the wider community having in keeping your child engaged in school?
 - Prompt: individuals/services outside of the school, faith leaders, community leaders etc.

Parent – school relationship/communication issues

- How would you describe your relationship with your child's school teachers and/or the school more broadly?
 - Prompt: do you have good communication with the school? Why/why not?
 - Prompt: do you feel engaged and connected to the school/school community?
- Do you feel as though the school understands and supports your needs as a parent? If not, what do you need from the school to feel more supported?
- What things have worked in the past that have made you feel supported?

OR

What are some type of things that the school could offer that would make you feel more supported?

e.g., parent workshops - about the school system, home education, supporting kids returning to school, strategies to encourage kids to engage in school etc.

Appendix 3. Topic Guide: Young People

Opening question(s):

- What do you love about school?
 - Prompt: has there been anything you ever liked at school?
 - Friendship groups, a particular class/teacher, event, activity, sports
- What are your biggest challenges at school?
 - Follow up prompt: How do these challenges impact your attitude and behaviour at school? Mental health, academically, socially, emotionally etc.

Connection school / teachers / peers

- How involved or connected to do you feel to your school?
 - Prompt: do you feel supported?
- What makes you feel supported at school?
 - Prompt: what do you need to make you feel more engaged at school?
- How would you describe your relationship with other students?
 - Prompt: do you have a small close group of friends? Or are you friends with a lot of different people? Or you don't feel like you have any proper friends at school?
- How would you describe the relationships you have with your classroom teachers or other school staff?
 - Prompt: are there certain teachers you get along better with than others? Why? (i.e., wellbeing/support staff/mentors compared to classroom teachers)

Connection to community/services

- How supported to you feel in your community to help you face the challenges you face at school?
 - Neighbours, sporting clubs, other extracurricular activities/groups, church/religious groups

Connection to family

- What role would you say your family plays in keeping you engaged at school?
 - Prompt: what are some things you think they are responsible for when helping you at school?
- Do they help you? Or do you feel as though they make it more difficult for you?

Cultural / language barriers

- Do you or your family have any cultural or language barriers that you face every day? Explain what these are.
 - Prompt: are you the ones often translating, interpreting, and passing on messages to your parents?
 - Prompt: do you feel as though your teachers or school is supportive, understanding and acceptive of your culture and/or faith?

Interventions

- What are some events, projects, clubs, or groups that you have been a part of at school?
 - Why did you join? Was it a positive/negative experience?
 - Do you think this helped you feel more involved at school?

Appendix 4. Survey: Parents and Carers

1. How old is your child?

- Under 12 years
- 12 years
- 13 years
- 14 years
- 15 years
- 16 years
- 17 years
- 18 years
- 19 years
- Over 19 years

2. Were you, or one of your child's birth parents, born overseas?

- Yes
- No

3. What is your relationship to your child?

- Parent
- Grandparent
- Kinship carer
- Foster carer
- Other (please specify)

4. Which country were you born in?

5. What language/s do you speak at home?

6. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Other (please specify)

7. What is your child's gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Other (please specify)

8. Is your child currently enrolled in a secondary school in the City of Greater Dandenong, City of Casey, or Cardinia Shire?

- Yes – City of Greater Dandenong
- Yes – City of Casey
- Yes – Cardinia Shire
- No

9. Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

| | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>I'm not sure</i> |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| My child often misses school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My child is often late to school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My child has no interest in attending school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My child finds it hard to concentrate at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My child has lost interest in activities outside of school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My child often engages in risk behaviours (drinking or drugs etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My child isolates themselves from friends | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My child often feels frustrated, angry or irritable at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My child wants to stop attending school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My child feels disconnected from school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My child feels no sense of belonging at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My child has experienced racism from students at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My child has experienced racism from staff at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Other: Please specify

10. Do you think that your child is disengaged from school?

You can find the definition of school disengagement [here](#).

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

11. What keeps your child interested and engaged at school?
Please select all that apply.

- Good relationships with staff and teachers
- Friends
- Sense of belonging to school
- Extra-curricular activities
- Enjoy schoolwork and learning
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

12. Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

| | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>I'm not sure</i> |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| The school is responsible for keeping my child engaged at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I am responsible for keeping my child engaged at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The school is good at communicating with parents/carers | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The school is inclusive of parents from different cultural backgrounds | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The school is inclusive of parent's students from different cultural backgrounds | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Our community has a role to play in keeping my child engaged in school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Our faith community has a role to play in keeping my child engaged in school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The school does a good job at keeping my child engaged | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The school is good at communicating if my child has any problems or concerns | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Other (please specify)

13. Who do you believe is most responsible for keeping your child engaged in school? (1 = most responsible and 4 = least responsible)

- Your child
- You (parents or carers)
- Your child's school
- Your community

14. What do you think would help your child stay engaged/ become more engaged in school?
Please tick all that apply.

- Extra-curricular activities
- Supportive staff and teachers
- Mental health services in schools e.g. counsellors
- Alcohol and drug services in schools
- Peer support
- Information for parents about school disengagement
- Information for parents about how to help children who might be disengaged
- I'm not sure
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

15. Is there anything else you would like to add about your child and their relationship to school?

Appendix 5 Survey: Young people

1. How old are you?

- Under 12 years
- 12 years
- 13 years
- 14 years
- 15 years
- 16 years
- 17 years
- 18 years
- 19 years
- Over 19 years

2. Were you, or at least one of your parents, born overseas?

- Yes
- No

3. Which country were you born in?

4. What country were your parents born in?

5. What language/s do you speak at home?

6. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Other (please specify)

7. Are you currently enrolled in a secondary school in the City of Greater Dandenong, City of Casey, or Cardinia Shire?

- Yes – City of Greater Dandenong
- Yes – City of Casey
- Yes – Cardinia Shire
- No

8. Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

| | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>I'm not sure</i> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| I often miss school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I am often late to school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have no interest in attending school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I find it hard to concentrate at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have lost interest in activities outside of school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I often engaged in risk behaviours (drinking or drugs etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I often isolate myself from my friends | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I often feel frustrated, angry or irritable at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I want to stop attending school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I feel disconnected from my school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I feel no sense of belonging at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have experienced racism from students at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have experienced racism from staff at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Other: Please specify

9. Do you think you are disengaged from school?

You can find the definition of school disengagement [here](#).

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

10. What keeps you interested and engaged at school?

Please select all that apply.

- Good relationships with staff and teachers
- Friends
- Sense of belonging to school
- Extra-curricular activities
- Enjoy school work and learning
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

11. Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

| | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>I'm not sure</i> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| My school is responsible for keeping me engaged at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My parents are responsible for keeping me engaged at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I am responsible for staying engaged at school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My school does a good job of keeping me engaged | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My school is good at communicating with my parents/carers | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My school is inclusive of parents from different cultural backgrounds | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My community has a role to play in keeping me engaged in school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My faith community has a role to play in keeping me engaged in school | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

If there is anything else about the above statements you would like to tell us more about, please comment here.

12. Who do you believe is most responsible for keeping you engaged in school? (1 = most responsible and 4 = least responsible)

- Yourself
- Your parents or carers
- Your school
- Your community

13. What do you think would help you stay engaged, or become more engaged with school? Please select all that apply. W

- Extra-curricular activities
- Supportive staff and teachers
- Mental health services in schools e.g. counsellors

- Alcohol and drug services in schools
- Peer support or mentoring
- Information for parents about school disengagement
- Information for parents about how to help children who might be disengaged
- I'm not sure
- Other (please specify)
- None of the above

14. Do you have any ideas about how to keep other young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds engaged at school?

15. Is there anything else you would like to add about your relationship with your school?