

# The Mount Alexander Shire Re-engage Project: Understanding the factors contributing to secondary school disengagement



This survey was conducted by Castlemaine Secondary College in partnership with Castlemaine District Community Health and funded by School Focused Youth Service

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This is a Connect Central Castlemaine Project



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# Abstract

A major concern to youth service providers in the Mount Alexander Shire is the number of young people who disengage from secondary education before attaining year twelve or equivalent. Coincident with the creation of the Federal Government's "Youth Connections" initiative, youth service providers in Mount Alexander Shire formed a collaborative group called Connect Central Castlemaine (CCC) to guide and support the local Youth Connections program.

Although youth unemployment and other indices of youth wellbeing are similar to other regional Local Government Areas, disparities continue to exist between regional and metropolitan indices of wellbeing with regional youth faring less well than their metropolitan based peers on many measures. In particular, the DEECD 2011 report on year 12 or equivalent retention rates shows that the Loddon Mallee region was the only one of nine regions in Victoria in which, year 12 attainment rates had declined (by 0.9%) since 1999, where the state average was an increase of 6.2%.<sup>1</sup>

Adolescent community profiles compiled by DEECD for the Shire of Mount Alexander<sup>2</sup> also report significantly higher rates of bullying, hospitalization for intentional self harm and psychiatric conditions, compared to state averages. The same report indicated that 30 percent of adolescents aged 12 to 14 surveyed in the Loddon Mallee Region had consumed alcohol within the previous 30 days, 7.6% had tried marijuana, 11.1 percent had sniffed glue or 'chromed', and 2.1 % had tried other forms of illegal drugs. It was felt that a formal study could objectively compare the relative significance of a broad range of factors contributing to youth disengagement, and would highlight the issues of greatest importance to young people in our region that influence their thinking and decision making around education, and provide a sound basis for the future developments of policies and practice in schools and youth service organisations.

The aims of this study were to use the contributions of key stakeholders to develop a survey that measures a broad range of attitudes to school absenteeism and disengagement, and to evaluate the statistical correlation of each factor with disengagement. Survey results were analysed and discussed with a representative working group to formulate recommendations as to how current and new youth programs can better meet the needs of the young people in our shire.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCCA)

<sup>2</sup> Source: 2010 Adolescent Community Profiles- DEECD

# Method

## *Participants*

Consent to participate in the study, was obtained from 42 young people aged between 13 and 19 years (Average age =14.8 yrs), who were either completely disengaged from secondary school education, not attending school on a regular basis or attending school with varying degrees of regularity. Participants were recruited from four subgroups with the aim of obtaining participants with a recent school attendance record ranging between zero percent (completely disengaged from school) to 100 percent. Eight participants were clients of the local Youth Connections program and had been previously determined to be disengaged or at risk of disengagement from education; five participants were clients of Castlemaine District Community Health (CDCH) youth drug and alcohol outreach service, most of whom were severely disengaged or at high risk of disengagement from school; 10 were recruited from the VCAL students studying at the Castlemaine campus of Bendigo Regional TAFE, and the remaining 19 participants were chosen at random from the population of regularly attending high school students.

Focus groups were advertised in local papers inviting both parents and teachers of students at risk of disengagement to contribute their thoughts and ideas as to the factors that might contribute to absenteeism and disengagement from the school curriculum. Youth service providers working in the areas of youth drug and alcohol rehabilitation, community development and re-engagement services also contributed their experience.

From the list of all 43 suggested factors that might contribute to disengagement, a series of 77 statements were devised with which participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement on a 7 point Likert scale. Table 1 shows the major factors thought to influence disengagement, identified by the focus groups and the questions that were designed to measure these factors. Paired opposite statements (printed in brown) were used as an indicator of consistency of responses, to identify participants who might respond at random to the survey statement.

**Table 1 Factors identified by youth focus groups and service providers as important to youth disengagement.**

Survey Question Number	Factor of interest	Questions aiming to measure this factor
9 37 46 58 19 39 51 10 59 1 11 20 38 60 47 2 14 12 21 40 52 73 62 3 13 22 26 41 61 53 23 48 4 24 68 42 27 30 45 70 25 5 67 54	Perceived importance of education General motivation Self esteem Resilience Fear of Failure General goal directedness Desire for autonomy Fear of consequences of absenteeism Organisation/ time management Social cognition skills Transition to high school Perceived level of intelligence Perceived level of academic achievement Enjoyment of curriculum Possible difficulty with auditory learning Perceived attitude of teachers Adequacy of education support services Coping with Workload Positive parental attitude to learning	School is important if you want to do well in life High school education is not necessary to have a good life I try to work hard at most things I do There are lots of things I am interested in doing I don't care about what marks I get at school I want to do well at school I am embarrassed about the way I look Sometimes I feel pretty useless I am confident I can get over most problems that come up in my life I do not like to try new things because I don't want to fail I know what sort of job I want to have when I am 20 I have no idea what I want to do when I am older I have a lot of ambitions for my future I am frustrated with always being told what to do I want to do what I want to do I shouldn't have to do what the teachers say I am not worried about what will happen if I skip school Sometimes I forget things I need for school like notes , money for excursions etc I don't always know what day of the week it is I have some trouble reading a clock and calculating time If I treat others with respect, they will respect me I make friends easily It is in my best interest to cooperate with others School started to get difficult when I got to high school I am smarter than average I am not very intelligent My marks at school are usually very good Every year I am falling further behind in school Mostly school work is interesting and enjoyable School is boring I would go to school regularly if I didn't have to do the classes I don't like Most teachers are useless at explaining things I have trouble remembering instructions in class I learn best by doing not by listening or reading Teacher have it in for me Teachers treat me with respect There are some great teachers that really helped me Schools provides extra help for people who have difficulty learning or personal problems I would be better at school if I had a tutor or aid I struggle with the amount of work at school My parents don't really care if I go to school or not My parents are often angry if I get a bad marks My parents encourage me to do my best even if I get a bad school report

15	Parent Practical support	My parents help me to get ready for school
74		I always bring lunch to school or have money to buy it
69		My family will help me with my school work if I need it
28	Family stress	I can't go to school regularly because I am needed to help at home
44		There is a lot of stress in my family
63		I feel safe and well cared for at home
76	Socioeconomic stress	Money is never tight around my place
6		My family can afford to buy everything I need for school
49		I always have enough to eat
31	Transport to school	Sometime I don't go to school because of transport difficulties
43	Social pressure to miss school	Sometimes I miss school because I want to do something else with friends
29		I get cred for skipping school
16	Positive Social experiences of school	I am not welcome at school
32		I have good friends at school
55		Sometimes I don't want to go to school because I am embarrassed about my clothes
36		If certain people left the school, I would probably go to school regularly
66	Being Bullied at School	<b>I feel safe at school</b>
64		<b>I am bullied or teased at school</b>
7	Chronic /frequent illness	I mostly miss school because I am unwell
71	Depression/anxiety	My doctor said that I am depressed and / or anxious
50		I feel sad a lot of the time
75		I feel worried a lot of the time for no special reason
35		No one understands me
17	Depression/ problems with sleep	I don't often get a good nights sleep
56		I sleep more than ten hours a day
33		I find it really hard to get out of bed some days
72	Drug alcohol use	I use drugs on a regular basis
65		Occasionally I drink a lot of alcohol
8	Difficulty concentrating in class	<b>I have no difficulty concentrating at school</b>
18		<b>I am never restless or disruptive in class</b>
57	Disability	I have a health condition or disability that makes school work harder for me
34	Difficulty with Literacy	I have always had difficulty with reading and writing
77	Fear of consequences of not doing homework	Sometimes I miss school to avoid getting into trouble when I haven't done my homework

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### *Survey administration*

Surveys were administered to small groups or to individuals where the participant required one-to-one assistance with reading and understanding the survey questions. A survey administration guide was provided to each administrator to ensure uniformity of administration. Participants were provided with a brief explanation of the purpose of the survey and the arrangements to ensure their anonymity before being asked to complete a consent form which was

immediately detached from the rest of the survey. The consent form included a request to access school attendance records to assist with gaining an accurate picture of attendance in the last six months. Where no consent was obtained to access school records, the participants self assessment of attendance was used as the measure of engagement.

There was no time limit set and all but one participant responded to all 77 statements. Written instructions asked participants to consider the survey statements in the context of the last six months they attended school, even if they were currently not attending. This point was emphasized by the survey administrators. Participants were also asked to respond to two open ended questions to give an opportunity for free form responses, stimulated by immersion in thoughts about school and home life.

The last page of the survey was detached from the survey body as soon as completed to ensure anonymity. This contained a list of local youth support services, asking participants to indicate if they were aware of or had utilised these services and inviting them to follow up any concerns they had with one of these service providers by providing a follow up contact number .

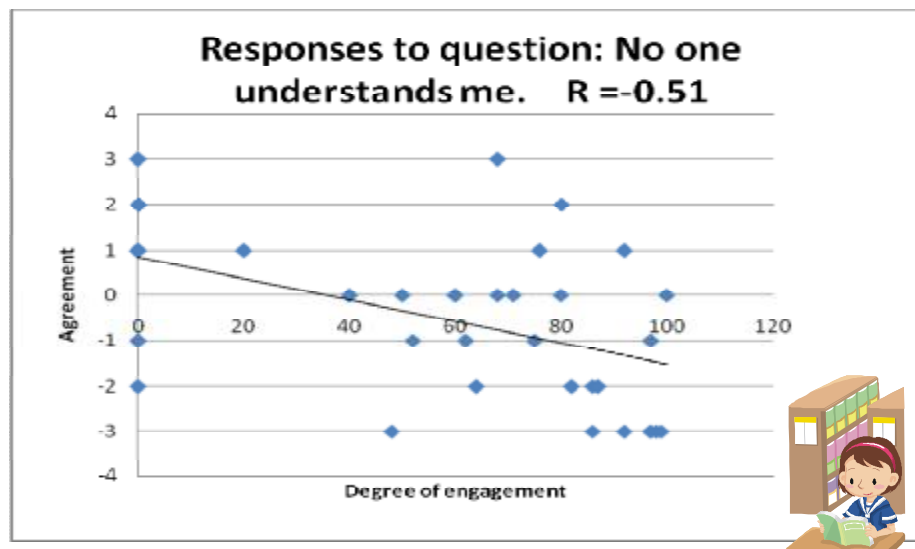
## *Data analysis*

In this study we correlated young people's beliefs and attitudes (as reflected by their degree of agreement with the 77 survey statements) to their 'degree of disengagement' with secondary education as measured by average school attendance levels. Responses to each statement were scored as follows: -3 (strongly disagree) , -2 (disagree) -1 (slightly disagree) 0 (not sure) +1 (slightly agree), +2 (agree) and +3 (strongly agree).

Embedded in the survey were five pairs of complimentary statements such as "I am smarter than average" and "I am not very intelligent" designed to check for participant consistency in responses. Participants who demonstrated a high degree of inconsistency in responses or demonstrated a pattern of responses that indicated lack of cooperation (for example responding to all questions with a "not sure" response) were to be excluded from the survey, however all participants appeared to have understood and considered all questions carefully and were consistent in their responses to the paired opposite statements.

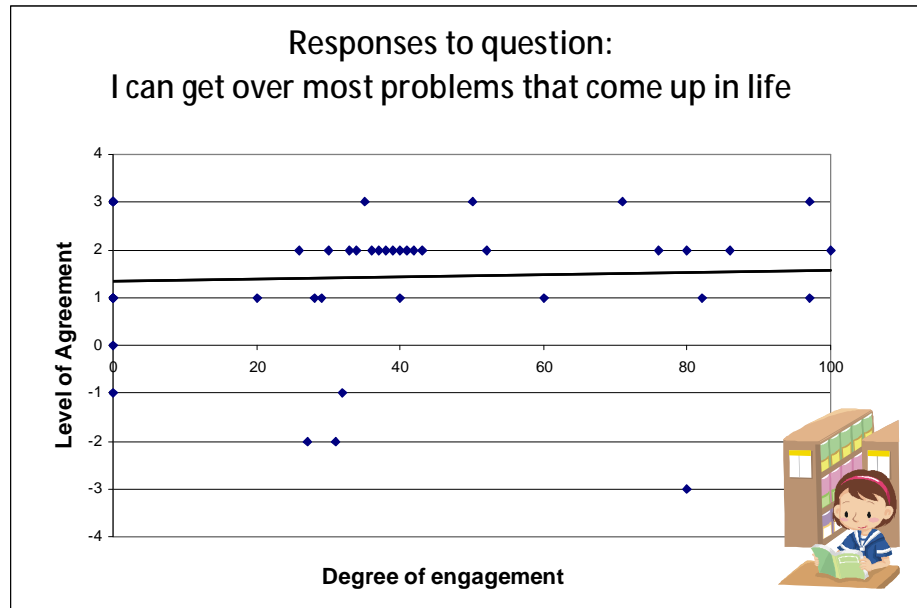
## Notes on interpretation of correlation values

A correlation value determines the strength of the relationship between two variables. In this case the degree of disengagement of the participant (the dependent variable) was correlated with the response score for each of the survey statements (the independent variables). Figure 1 shows a graphical representation of the correlation between degree of engagement and response to the statement 'Nobody understands me' as an example.



**Figure 1** Correlation between degree of engagement and response to the statement "Nobody understands me"

Each dot represents an individual young person's response to this statement. (There appears to be less than 42 dots where two or more responses overlap). A downward slope from left to right is called a negative correlation. In this case the correlation value (denoted 'R') was calculated at -0.51. In this study, a negative correlation indicates that disengaged youth are more likely to agree with the statement under consideration. Conversely, a positive correlation means that disengaged youth are more likely to disagree with a statement. The strength of the relationship is reflected in the mathematical slope of the line (not affected by scaling). Correlation values vary between zero (which would be represented by a flat line on the graph, indicating that there is no relationship between the variables), and  $\pm 1.0$ ; indicating a perfect relationship as you might expect between say, the number of hours a young person works and the amount of pay they receive. Figure 2 gives an example of a survey statement that generated a near zero correlation.



**Figure 2** Correlation between degree of engagement and response to ‘ I can get over most problems that come up in life’

The very small statistical correlation value in this case ( $R = 0.08$ ) should be interpreted as meaning that young people who are disengaged are no more likely to feel unable to solve their own problems than those who are fully engaged, or perhaps; that *resilience* (the trait that this question aims to capture) is not an important factor in predicting disengagement.

More important than the size of a statistical correlation value is the degree of statistical significance of a correlation value, which is determined by referring to standard statistical tables and is influenced by the sample size, in this case 42 participants (where the whole group response is being reported) or 18 if we report a correlation for female student only for example. As the number of participants gets larger, even a small correlation value becomes more significant.

A *significant* correlation value indicates that there is less than five percent chance of obtaining the pattern of responses observed, where there is indeed no relationship between the variables. A *highly significant* correlation value indicates that the likelihood of obtaining the results observed when there is no relationship is less than one percent. It should be noted that a significant correlation does not imply that one factor *causes* the other, simply that there is a relationship. For example there may be a correlation between ice cream sales and the evaporation rate from water storages; one clearly does not cause the other and a relationship appears to exist mathematically because both are related to at least one other variable, for example air temperature.



## Results

Table 2 shows the strength of relationship between individual statements and disengagement when all 42 participant responses are included (column one); female students only (column 2), male students only (column 3), students aged 15 or older (column 4) and students under 15 years of age (column 5). Correlations that are *significant* are highlighted while correlations that are *highly significant* are highlighted and outlined with a border. The sixth column in table 2 shows the average of all participant responses to each statement.

**Table 2: Correlation between level of agreement with statements and degree of disengagement**

Q	Survey statement	0.304/ 0.393	0.468/ 0.590	0.423 /0.537	0.456/ 0.575	0.413/ 0.526	average response
		all n=42	females, n=18	males, n=24	15+ yrs n=19	under 15 yrs n=23	
1	I can get over most problems that come up in my life	0.081	0.260	0.011	0.084	0.261	1.43
2	I want to do what I want to do	-0.145	-0.234	-0.039	-0.392	-0.101	1.50
3	It is in my best interest to cooperate with others	-0.005	0.135	-0.120	-0.341	0.258	1.07
4	Most teachers are useless at explaining things	-0.071	-0.049	-0.104	-0.021	-0.451	-0.02
5	My parents don't really care if I go to school or not	-0.227	-0.380	-0.058	-0.161	-0.059	-2.43
6	My family can afford to buy everything I need for school	-0.206	-0.187	-0.272	-0.690	0.162	0.95
7	I mostly miss school because I am unwell	0.205	0.463	0.038	-0.062	0.212	0.05
8	I have no difficulty concentrating at school	0.191	0.068	0.237	-0.385	0.446	-0.55
9	School is important if you want to do well in life	0.014	0.039	-0.089	-0.119	-0.066	1.55
10	Sometimes I feel pretty useless	-0.166	-0.070	-0.261	-0.156	-0.127	-0.12
11	I do not like to try new things because I don't want to fail	-0.243	-0.379	-0.238	-0.391	-0.085	-0.90
12	I am not worried about what will happen if I skip school	-0.208	-0.353	-0.023	-0.237	-0.105	-0.50
13	School started to get difficult when I got to high school	-0.411	-0.271	-0.408	-0.274	-0.526	0.55
14	I shouldn't have to do what the teachers say	0.063	0.095	0.175	0.068	-0.016	-0.86
15	My parents help me to get ready for school	-0.065	0.260	-0.176	-0.059	-0.210	0.17
16	I am not welcome at school	-0.512	-0.409	-0.530	-0.186	-0.741	-1.00
17	I don't often get a good nights sleep	-0.106	-0.067	-0.208	0.133	-0.201	0.50
18	I am never restless or disruptive in class	-0.107	-0.461	-0.012	-0.348	-0.083	-0.93
19	I don't care about what marks I get at school	-0.195	-0.124	-0.142	0.092	-0.476	-1.05
20	I know what sort of job I want to have when I am 20	0.027	-0.289	0.351	0.193	-0.400	0.79
21	Sometimes I forget things I need for school like notes, money for excursions	-0.129	0.271	-0.389	-0.028	-0.208	0.83
22	I am smarter than average	0.134	0.056	0.192	0.048	0.521	-0.14
23	School is boring	0.031	-0.104	0.037	0.029	-0.471	1.38
24	I have trouble remembering instructions in class	-0.011	0.534	-0.179	0.106	-0.111	0.00
25	I struggle with the amount of work at school	-0.029	0.593	-0.258	0.019	-0.140	-0.05
26	I am not very intelligent	-0.046	0.273	-0.326	-0.111	-0.340	-0.64
27	Teachers treat me with respect	0.025	0.251	-0.046	0.233	-0.130	0.69
28	I can't go to school regularly because I am needed to help at home	-0.092	-0.659	0.216	0.192	0.045	-1.93
29	I get cred for skipping school	-0.193	0.046	-0.156	0.042	-0.220	-1.60
30	There are some great teachers that really helped me	-0.114	0.030	-0.099	-0.096	-0.090	1.95
31	Sometime I don't go to school because of transport difficulties	-0.221	-0.254	-0.151	-0.227	-0.121	-1.60
32	I have good friends at school	0.288	0.220	0.280	0.130	0.338	1.60

33	I find it really hard to get out of bed some days	-0.048	0.359	-0.199	0.091	-0.269	2.07
34	I have always had difficulty with reading and writing	-0.209	0.059	-0.266	0.094	-0.540	-1.26
35	No one understands me	-0.496	-0.416	-0.479	-0.468	-0.577	-0.40
36	If certain people left the school, I would probably go to school regularly	-0.491	-0.656	-0.327	-0.532	-0.417	-0.79
37	High school education is not necessary to have a good life	-0.181	0.106	-0.176	0.066	-0.058	-1.29
38	I have no idea what I want to do when I am older	-0.229	0.022	-0.344	-0.192	0.060	-0.64
39	I want to do well at school	0.042	-0.202	0.083	-0.117	0.011	1.98
40	I don't always know what day of the week it is	-0.402	0.100	-0.606	-0.363	-0.484	-0.74
41	My marks at school are usually very good	0.321	0.199	0.370	-0.002	0.452	0.26
42	Teacher have it in for me	-0.040	0.046	-0.033	-0.242	-0.173	-0.26
43	Sometimes I miss school because I want to do something else with friends	-0.290	-0.206	-0.263	-0.171	-0.499	-0.02
44	There is a lot of stress in my family	-0.135	-0.238	0.023	0.441	-0.514	-0.05
45	Schools provides extra help for people who have difficulty learning or personal problems	0.165	0.322	0.125	0.041	0.012	0.50
46	I try to work hard at most things I do	-0.066	-0.072	0.068	-0.084	0.047	1.33
47	I am frustrated with always being told what to do	-0.200	-0.195	-0.119	-0.084	-0.455	0.45
48	I would go to school regularly if I didn't have to do the classes I don't like	-0.002	-0.212	0.130	0.515	-0.309	0.74
49	I always have enough to eat	-0.107	-0.208	-0.090	-0.396	0.033	0.98
50	I feel sad a lot of the time	-0.392	-0.226	-0.458	-0.271	-0.546	-0.86
51	I am embarrassed about the way I look	-0.103	-0.128	-0.219	-0.079	-0.041	-1.45
52	I have some trouble reading a clock and calculating time	-0.118	-0.110	-0.058	0.225	-0.459	-1.90
53	Mostly school work is interesting and enjoyable	-0.083	-0.299	-0.023	-0.483	0.053	-0.57
54	My parents encourage me to do my best even if I get a bad school report	-0.027	0.205	-0.163	-0.451	-0.008	1.95
55	Sometimes I don't want to go to school because I am embarrassed about my clothes	-0.200	0.088	-0.311	-0.172	0.013	-2.14
56	I sleep more than ten hours a day	0.079	-0.323	0.386	0.028	-0.119	-1.40
57	I have a health condition or disability that makes school work harder for me	-0.357	-0.377	-0.247	-0.221	-0.447	-1.93
58	There are lots of things I am interested in doing	0.024	0.002	0.028	-0.244	0.170	1.43
59	I am confident	0.131	0.272	0.089	-0.056	0.198	1.05
60	I have a lot of ambitions for my future	0.002	-0.141	-0.010	-0.209	-0.100	1.21
61	Every year I am falling further behind in school	0.027	0.101	-0.067	0.348	-0.573	-0.19
62	I make friends easily	0.042	0.189	-0.063	-0.230	0.077	1.14
63	I feel safe and well cared for at home	0.073	0.206	-0.061	-0.495	0.691	2.07
64	I am bullied or teased at school	-0.304	-0.030	-0.313	-0.239	-0.222	-1.12
65	Occasionally I drink a lot of alcohol	-0.610	-0.436	-0.637	-0.522	-0.586	-0.79
66	I feel safe at school	0.303	0.469	0.152	-0.108	0.539	0.67
67	My parents are often angry if I get a bad marks	-0.022	0.021	0.113	-0.016	0.037	-0.12
68	I learn best by doing not by listening or reading	-0.293	-0.230	-0.171	-0.191	-0.440	0.98
69	My family will help me with my school work if I need it	0.030	0.012	0.000	-0.244	0.073	2.02
70	I would be better at school if I had a tutor or aid	-0.181	-0.342	-0.153	0.116	-0.563	-0.86
71	My doctor said that I am depressed and / or anxious	-0.450	-0.347	-0.479	-0.392	-0.453	-1.26
72	I use drugs on a regular basis	-0.564	-0.359	-0.579	-0.431	-0.627	-2.00
73	If I treat others with respect, they will respect me	0.197	0.037	0.304	0.163	0.294	1.24
74	I always bring lunch to school or have money to buy it	0.237	0.012	0.221	0.082	0.191	1.36
75	I feel worried a lot of the time for no special reason	-0.290	-0.018	-0.467	-0.207	-0.340	-0.69
76	Money is never tight around my place	-0.100	-0.448	0.213	-0.254	-0.236	0.57
77	Sometimes I miss school to avoid getting into trouble when I haven't done my homework	-0.109	-0.326	0.092	-0.076	-0.270	-0.71

## *Discussion*

In interpreting the results shown in Table 2, it is useful to consider the average response (columns 6 ) in combination with the correlation values. Even for statements that did not show a significant correlation with disengagement, some useful information can be gathered, for example the statement 'I can get over most problems that come up in my life', the average response of 1.43 tells us that on average, young people slightly agree or agree with the statement. If the average scores on this statement had been negative ( -2.0 for example) this would indicate that in general, young people struggle with a sense of being able to overcome problems in there lives which in turn might lead us to conclude that additional assistance in general problem solving or resilience building could benefit all young people.

As well as wanting to know which survey statements correlated most highly with disengagement we were also interested in statements which did not correlate, because lack of significant correlation means that the disengaged are no more or less likely to agree with that particular statement than their engaged peers. In this way, some widely held perceptions about causal factors with disengagement are challenged. Consider the group of statements below.

### ***Statements with average group agreement but no correlation with disengagement***

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I find it really hard to get out of bed some days (Average 2.1)  
My family will help me with my school work if I need it (Average 2.02)  
I want to do well at school (Average 1.98)  
I sleep more than ten hours a day (Average 1.98)  
There are some great teachers that really helped me (Average 1.95)  
My parents encourage me to do my best even if I get a bad school report( Average 1.95)  
I have good friends at school (Average 1.6)  
School is important if you want to do well in life (Average 1.6)  
I want to do what I want to do' (Average 1.5)  
There are lots of things I am interested in doing (Average 1.43)  
I always bring lunch to school or have money to buy it ( Average 1.36)  
I try to work hard at most things I do (Average 1.33)  
If I treat others with respect, they will respect me ( Average 1.24)  
I have a lot of ambitions for my future ( Average 1.21)  
I make friends easily (Average 1.14)  
It is in my best interest to cooperate with others' (Average 1.1)  
I am confident (Average 1.05)

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Some of these results will come as no surprise but others, such as ‘My parents encourage me to do my best, even if I get a bad school report’ and ‘My family will help me with my school work if I need it’ which have very high agreement rates, challenges the perception that parents’ lack of interest or encouragement for their children to do well at school could be influential in the student level of engagement.

The agreement level with the statement ‘School is important if you want to do well in life’ (Average 1.6) suggests that most young people understand and respect the importance of education, regardless of their degree of engagement which challenges the perception that some disengaged students do not appreciate the importance of completing secondary education. Similarly, supposition or beliefs that disengaged youth differ from their peers in levels of ambition, work ethic, respect for others, ability to make friends, or confidence are not supported by this data.

Statements which were disagreed with on average, but showed no correlation with disengagement help further identify issues that might be important for young people in general, but do not help us to identify issues that distinguish the engaged student from the disengaged.

***Statements with average group disagreement but no correlation with disengagement***

	Average disagreement
My parents don't really care if I go to school or not	(-2.48)
Sometimes I don't want to go to school because I am embarrassed about my clothes	(-2.14)
Sometime I don't go to school because of transport difficulties	( -1.60)
I get cred for skipping school	(-1.60)
I am embarrassed about the way I look	(-1.45)
I sleep more than ten hours a day	(-1.40)
High school education is not necessary to have a good life	( -1.29)
I am never restless or disruptive in class	( -0.93)
I do not like to try new things because I don't want to fail	( -0.90)
I shouldn't have to do what the teachers say	( -0.86)
Sometimes I forget things I need for school like notes, money for excursions etc	( -0.83)

So even students who are severely disengaged from education agree that that their parents do care if they go to school or not. Clearly transport difficulties (an often cited reason for absenteeism) were not an issue for this group as a whole, nor were disengaged youth more likely to

think they gained peer respect for missing school; and did not consider themselves more forgetful, disruptive or defiant than their more engaged peers.

A further group of results can be described as statements for which there were no correlations with any subgroup, and group agreement was neither strongly in favour or against with the statement. It can be broadly interpreted that there is either a higher degree of individual differences in opinion around these statements (balanced responses between strong agreement and disagreement); general ambivalence to this statement or a combination of both. For example, it appears that while some students strongly disagreed and some strongly agreed with feelings of uselessness (statement 10) there was no relationship with level of disengagement. Similarly, concern for experiencing consequences for skipping school did not appear as a significant deterrent overall (group average score -0.50) so while some students are very concerned about the consequences of absenteeism others were not at all concerned.

***Statements with neutral group response and no correlation with disengagement***

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Sometimes I feel pretty useless	-0.12
I am not worried about what will happen if I skip school	-0.50
I don't often get a good nights sleep	0.17
I have no idea what I want to do when I am older	0.50
Teachers have it in for me	-0.64
Schools provides extra help for people who have difficulty learning or personal problems	-0.26
I am frustrated with always being told what to do	0.50
My parents are often angry if I get a bad marks	0.45
I always have enough to eat	0.98

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The remaining thirty one of the seventy seven survey statements resulted in a significant or highly significant correlation with student engagement. For ease of interpretation these are discussed according to subgroups.

*Most significant correlations with disengagement for girls*

I can't go to school regularly because I am needed to help at home	-0.659
If certain people left the school, I would probably go to school regularly	-0.656
I struggle with the amount of work at school	0.593
I have trouble remembering instructions in class	0.534
I feel safe at school	0.469
I mostly miss school because I am unwell	0.463
I am never restless or disruptive in class	-0.461
Money is never tight around my place	-0.448
Occasionally I drink a lot of alcohol	-0.436
No one understands me	-0.416

\*critical values  $p < 0.05 = 0.468$ ,  $p < 0.01 = 0.590$  two tailed,  $n=18$

These results indicate that the three key reasons for disengagement for young women are

- Being needed to help at home taking priority over attending school
- Problematic peer (or possibly) teacher relationships
- Not feeling safe at school

Struggling with workload and having difficulty remembering instructions correlated significantly with disengagement but were identified as important issues for the *more engaged* students. Disengaged students were significantly less concerned with these issues.

Correlations with the last four statement on the list did not reach significance (0.468) but are noted as ‘approaching significance’ because of the recurrence of these themes in other subgroups to be discussed later.

The confidentiality arrangements around the survey preclude the identification of individuals who responded to a particular survey statement, so we cannot for example use the survey to identify those individuals who agreed that being needed to help at home was contributing to their reduced attendance at school; however many families who have parents or children who

need extra family support will be known to support workers such as mental health professionals, disability support workers, maternal and child health nurses etc. Alerting workers in these fields to this survey's findings may provide a stimulus for them to enquire about the degree to which young people in their client's family are being relied upon for support, and to discuss this with clients and offer appropriate support or referrals.

It was also noted by the reference group that 'being needed to help at home' might also constitute the need to assist with family business activities or perform domestic duties to support parents' employment needs. Alerting parents to the possible detrimental effects of their children's over investment in supporting family business may be required where this issue is identified as relating to specific students. Student wellbeing officers are probably best placed to identify young people to whom this situation applies and to discuss it with the family.

Not feeling safe at school could have multiple cause and effect relationships with other factors, but when linked with a coincidental expression of 'problematic peer and or teacher relationships', makes a stronger case for the idea that interpersonal skills within the individual and peer group are strongly implicated as contributors to disengagement.

### *Most significant correlations with disengagement for boys*

Occasionally I drink a lot of alcohol	-0.637
I don't always know what day of the week it is	-0.600
I use drugs on a regular basis	-0.600
I am not welcome at school	-0.543
No one understands me	-0.500
My doctor said that I am depressed and / or anxious	-0.471
I feel worried a lot of the time for no special reason	-0.462
I feel sad a lot of the time	-0.449
School started to get difficult when I got to high school	-0.400
Sometimes I forget things I need for school like notes , money for excursions etc	-0.379

This survey indicates that the most significant factors related to absenteeism or disengagement for young men are broadly:

- Use of alcohol and drugs
- Not knowing what day of the week it is
- Problematic peer or teacher relationships/ isolation
- Depression and anxiety

The difficulty with these factors is that it is much harder to determine cause and effect relationships. One way to clarify this would be to enlist the participation of individuals who work with young people with mental health concerns and/or alcohol and other drug dependencies, to discuss perceptions on the interactions between substance use, mental health and disengagement from education with their clients.

Not knowing what day of the week it is could reasonably be assumed to be due to lack of a weekly routine for disengaged youth, and/ or related to substance abuse, but could also be indicative of poor time management or temporal awareness issues.

While drug and alcohol education is now firmly embedded in the curriculum of Victorian schools as an early intervention strategy, a more intensive approach may be warranted for young people who are most at risk of developing substance abuse and related issues. Again the issue of identifying those who might most benefit by such a program is fraught with confidentiality issues and the need to obtain parental consent to work with very young students. Discussions with local police to ascertain current policies and practices around underage drinking may generate some useful information to assist with early identification and intervention. Local programs such as 'YouthINC' to which underage drinkers apprehended by police can be referred may need review.

Early intervention for young people who show signs of developing depression, anxiety or substance abuse relies upon identification of individuals at an early stage. Community education through programs such as the Orygen "Youth Mental Health First Aid" course, would encourage the destigmatisation and misconceptions about mental health and progressively reduce the barriers to seeking advice and treatment.

School Psychologists, Social Workers and Nurses could also be consulted for input into future program development around early intervention to improve mental wellbeing.



### *Significant correlations with disengagement at 15 years plus*

1	My family can afford to buy everything I need for school	-0.696
2	If certain people left the school, I would probably go to school regularly	-0.561
3	Mostly school work is interesting and enjoyable	-0.536
4	Occasionally I drink a lot of alcohol	-0.534
5	I would go to school regularly if I didn't have to do the classes I don't like	0.513
6	I feel safe and well cared for at home	-0.493
7	No one understands me	-0.483
8	There is a lot of stress in my family	0.449
9	My parents encourage me to do my best even if I get a bad school report	-0.448
10	I use drugs on a regular basis	-0.447

The most significant factors for disengaged youth over 15 years are

- Problematic peer relationships
- Alcohol consumption
- Feelings of being misunderstood

For this age group, economic factors were identified as the most significant distinguishing feature between engagement and disengagement, however being a negative correlation this issue was of much greater concern for engaged students, suggesting that perceived lack of financial resources was not contributing to disengagement.

Enjoyment of the curriculum appears not to be a problem for the disengaged either, who generally agreed that school work is interesting and enjoyable and disagreed that they would go to school more regularly if they didn't have to do the classes they didn't like. This is a counter intuitive outcome. One explanation for this result could be that about half the participants in this age group completed the survey while attending a VCAL course and might have been responding to these questions with reference to their present environment rather than the last six months of high school, despite instructions to the contrary. The reliability of all participants to respond to statement only in the context of their last six month of contact with high school should be kept in mind as a potential source of data contamination when considering any of the survey outcomes.

Disengaged youth felt safer and more well cared for at home than their engaged peers in the older age group, which is also an interesting result that contrasts strongly with findings for the under 15 year old group shown below.

*Significant correlations with disengagement for youth under 15yrs*

I am not welcome at school	-0.784
I feel safe and well cared for at home	0.691
I use drugs on a regular basis	-0.627
Occasionally I drink a lot of alcohol	-0.586
No one understands me	-0.577
Every year I am falling further behind in school	-0.573
I would be better at school if I had a tutor or aid	-0.563
I feel sad a lot of the time	-0.546
I have always had difficulty with reading and writing	-0.540
I feel safe at school	0.539
School started to get difficult when I got to high school	-0.526
I am smarter than average	0.521
There is a lot of stress in my family	-0.514
Sometimes I miss school because I want to do something else with friends	-0.499
I don't always know what day of the week it is	-0.484
I don't care about what marks I get at school	-0.476
School is boring	-0.471
I have some trouble reading a clock and calculating time	-0.459
I am frustrated with always being told what to do	-0.455
My doctor said that I am depressed and / or anxious	-0.453
My marks at school are usually very good	0.452
Most teachers are useless at explaining things	-0.451
I have a health condition or disability that makes school work harder for me	-0.447
I have no difficulty concentrating at school	0.446
I learn best by doing not by listening or reading	-0.440
If certain people left the school, I would probably go to school regularly	-0.417

critical values  $p < 0.05 = 0.413$  ,  $p < 0.01 = 0.526$  two tailed  $n=23$

For young people in this age group, there were many more survey statements that distinguished disengaged students from their engaged peers. Issues of importance discussed in relation to other subgroups of participants include,

- Problematic peer relationships
- Alcohol consumption
- Feelings social isolation (not welcome, being misunderstood)
- Depression and anxiety

In addition, disengaged youth under 15 years were distinguished from peers in that they

- Did not feel safe and well cared for at home or at school
- Had a sense that they were less intelligent, falling behind academically, struggling with literacy skills but could do better with more education support
- Identified high school transition as the time when things started to get harder
- Experienced more family stress
- Were influenced by peers to miss school
- Were bored and unmotivated
- May have greater difficulty with time management
- Have difficulty concentrating at school
- Are more likely to have a disability that affects their learning

To feel safe and well cared for at home and at school is a basic right which is clearly being undermined for some young people in our community. While a sense of ‘being bullied’ at school was not significant for any one subgroup of participants, it was significant to the group as a whole (ie when all 42 participants responses are included). This indicates that current approaches to reducing antisocial behaviour in schools are not as affective as they could be. Note also that it is the disengaged student who is more likely to feel unsafe and or bullied at school and/or home; which may contradict the stereotypical image of disengaged youth. Remember also that the survey results rely entirely on each young person’s perception of their own situation, a reported lack of physical security could explain some apparent antisocial or threatening behaviours commonly associated with disengagement ( body piecing, tattoos, gang membership, weapon carrying etc).

Agreement with the statement ‘Most teachers were useless at explaining things’ showed a significant correlation with engagement for students under 15 years of age. This result could be interpreted as indicative of disengaged youth being generally more negative in attitude towards teachers, and there may be more learning difficulties within this group or it may be that this group have genuinely encountered a high proportion of teachers who were ‘hopeless at explaining things’. The group total response ( average = 0) indicates that on the whole, students neither agreed or disagreed with this statement.

## *Recommendations*

The survey results were analysed and discussed at several forums of school support workers, teachers, and youth service providers including the local youth connections management group (Connect Central Castlemaine) which includes representatives of all the key youth service stake holders in Mount Alexander Shire. The aim was to translate key learnings into actions that would target specific needs identified, tailor existing youth services to better reach and meet the needs of disengaged youth; identify service gaps and ensure these are recognized and addressed through the CCC planning process. Recommendation arrived at from these discussions fell into six main areas.

### *1. Early intervention in disengagement*

It was recommended that school wellbeing teams use the student attendance mapping tool to identify and intervene early with young people where attendance at school or performance is becoming problematic. A shorter version of the original survey containing statements that served best to describe the young person’s experiences could be used as a guide in conversations around the young person’s wellbeing and other needs.

Issues identified as impacting on the risk of disengagement or wellbeing generally should lead to appropriate referrals to existing school and community youth services through the newly developed ‘No Wrong Door’ procedure created by Connect Central Castlemaine to expedite referrals of young people to the appropriate service provider.

## 2. *Action on drug and alcohol use*

It is recommended that youth drug and alcohol workers and their clients be supported by their agencies to engage in conversations aimed specifically at reaching a better understanding of the interactions between substance abuse, mental health and school disengagement.

Schools based drug and alcohol education programs should develop strategies to identify and target those at greatest risk of substance abuse and disengagement for extension programs or referral to other services.

Representatives of Connect Central Castlemaine ought to reconnect with local police to discuss current responses to underage drinking and to ensure referrals by police to the 'Youthinc' alcohol diversion program occur as per program guidelines.

Review of current alcohol and drug education programs might seek to include parents in out of hours programs. Additional funding may be required to obtain the services of additional high quality presenters.

Connect Central Castlemaine should also use its influence to reinvigorate community discussion around establishing permanent recreational facilities for young people to provide access to safe places out of school hours for young people to socialize in an alcohol and drug free environment.

## 3. *Focus on mental health and social skills*

The prevalence and significance of anxiety and depression in the youth population indicates the need for increased mental health support to young people at risk, through, prevention, screening and early intervention. Having teachers, parents or the young person themselves make referrals to the school wellbeing team for assessment as per an early intervention strategy should increase the likelihood of identifying mental health needs early and sourcing appropriate ongoing support.

The growing community awareness of the importance of mental health in general wellbeing has generated interest to increase accessibility of mental health education and awareness programs. Wherever possible, all persons who work with young people should be encouraged and supported to attend youth mental health first aid training, and other suitable courses. School based education programs for young people should also be supported to increase awareness of and destigmatise mental health problems. Similarly, social skills education and conflict resolution training for all

young people is indicated as a high priority with the possibility of extension programs for those experiencing higher levels of interpersonal conflict.

#### *4. Further support early intervention in education*

These survey results emphasize the impact of learning difficulties as significantly influential in disengagement in the early years of secondary school. It is recommended that means of providing more early intervention strategies should be pursued by local education and service providers. Connect Central Castlemaine should continue to support the development of alternative flexible learning options to better meet the variety of academic abilities of young people.

#### *5. Sharing information & strengthening partnerships*

By utilising their existing links into the community the Connect Central Castlemaine members are ideally placed to communicate survey results and facilitate focus group discussions with existing education and youth support programs. This will facilitate continuous improvement and collaboration to identify and fill gaps in services.

#### *6. Support young women caring for family*

It is recommended that representatives of Connect Central Castlemaine approach local carer support groups to help identify young people who are acting as carers of family members with mental health, disability or alcohol and drug related issues to explore additional means of support.

## *Conclusion*

The Connect Central Castlemaine group is an appropriate body to oversee the follow through of recommendations made in this report. It is noted that some recommendations have already been incorporated into the 'Service Plan for Vulnerable Youth' which is the guiding document for youth service development and implementation in Mount Alexander Shire.