Staying on at school in New South Wales: sustaining quality, increasing retention, and providing transition support

Dr Margaret Vickers University of Western Sydney

In 1999, the Ministers of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) committed Australian schools to ensuring that “all students have access to the high quality education necessary to enable the completion of school education to year 12 or its vocational equivalent …” (Adelaide Declaration, 3.6). The declaration goes on to say that students’ experiences in school should provide a sound basis for future employment and for participation in further education and training. It places a strong value on the quality of secondary schooling. Retention matters but it is not end in itself. Indeed, students are unlikely to stay on if their experience of school is unsatisfactory.

Currently, one in four young Australians leave school without completing Year 12, and the children of the poor and poorly educated are clearly over-represented among this population. Of the 65 thousand students who entered year 7 in NSW secondary schools in 1997, approximately 20 thousand did not appear in year 12 classes six years later. Yet early leaving is not always ‘bad’. One of the most common reasons teenagers give for early leaving is the desire for a job. If the job they gain leads to a contract of training (particularly an apprenticeship), parents and schools can rightly claim this as a successful outcome. Unfortunately many early leavers do not achieve such positive outcomes. Compared with those who do complete Year 12, early leavers are generally less successful in gaining secure employment. In May 2001, among 15 to 24-year-olds who left school in the previous year without having completed Year 12, approximately 17.7 per cent were unemployed and not in training. The rate for Year 12 completers was 4.7 per cent (ABS, 2001). Young people who leave school before Year 12 tend to face significant hardships. Changes in the Australian economy place them at greater risk of low income, unemployment and dependency on government welfare.

Since 2000, public education systems across Australia have made concerted efforts to improve high school completion rates. Victoria has introduced a new senior certificate, and substantial revisions of Year 12 certificates are under way in Western Australia, Tasmania and South Australia. Queensland has made participation in school, TAFE, or a structured combination of work and training mandatory to age 16, while South Australia simply raised the leaving age to 16 years. Numerous examples of mentoring programs and local support networks have emerged in all systems. These aim to provide a safety net for students who are not well supported by their families; they focus not on what schools can do alone, but rather, on what governments and community agencies can achieve if they work with schools, employers and young people themselves to achieve higher levels of participation in post-compulsory education and training.

The first section of this paper outlines current research on student disengagement, and provides examples of programs and policies aimed at encouraging school completion. The second section considers what might be done to track early leavers and what kinds of transition support might be offered to them.
1. Increasing student engagement and improving high school completion rates

Numerous Australian research studies have sought to determine whether particular groups of young people might leave school before finishing Year 12, and if so, why. The first lesson from this strand of research is that young people who do leave early are often thinking about leaving during Year 9 or even earlier. More often than not, students who say they will leave early do exactly that. In 1995, approximately 13,600 year 9 students across Australia were surveyed as part of the 1995 Year 9 Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY-95). Among other things, they were asked, ‘When do you plan to leave school?’ Over 1000 students - approximately seven percent of the sample - replied ‘At the end of year 10’. When these students were re-contacted two years later, half of those who said they would leave at the end of year 10 had actually done so (Marks and Fleming, 1999). These researchers included a wide range of background variables and academic achievement measures in their models. After taking account of all these, they concluded that students who stated that they would not be at school in Year 12 were seven times more likely to leave before completing school than were students with higher aspirations (Marks, Fleming, Long and McMillan, 2000). An earlier NSW study of student aspirations produced similar findings Ainley and Sheret (1992).

Both the large-scale national longitudinal studies as well as local and state-based studies suggests that young people are making up their minds about when to leave early in their high school careers (Marks and Fleming, 1999; Lamb, Dwyer & Wynn, 2000; Marks, Fleming, Long and McMillan, 2000). International research provides similar findings. Several studies conducted in Canada and the USA also suggest that disengagement from school begins at an early age for many students (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Audas & Wilms, 2001).

Students stated intentions indicate fairly accurately which students are at risk; they also suggest that efforts to prevent early leaving need to begin in the junior years. When asked why they are thinking about leaving school, two themes consistently emerge from their answers: essentially, their motives for leaving are either dominated by the desire for work, or by a lack of interest in (or a dislike) of school. Some students cite both reasons: there is also a great deal of variation in the specific balance of student motives, depending on whether the student is an under-age leaver, leaves at the end of Year 10, during Year 11, or later. Motives also vary depending on where students come from (urban leavers tend to differ from early leavers in remote and rural areas). Gender plays a role in the balance of motives, for the work motive tends to have a greater pull on boys than on girls. Indigenous students, homeless students, and the very poor have a somewhat different balance of motives, yet across all groups, similar themes recur again and again.

The ABS survey on education and training experience in Australia reported that students most often cited work-related reasons for leaving school before completing year 12 (ABS, 1997), see Table 2. About 46.0 per cent of early leavers gave work and income-related reasons for quitting school. Most reported a desire to get a job or apprenticeship (42.5 per cent), while over 3 per cent reported that remaining at school would not necessarily help improve their chances of getting a job. This latter finding suggests that there are some young people who leave school because they do not believe that staying on would help them to get a job. This view exists even though the early leavers may be concerned about their employment prospects. Similar findings have been reported by Lamb, Dwyer & Wyn (2000), using longitudinal survey data, and by Ainley and Sheret (1992), Pitman and Herschel (2002), Teese (2002), Smyth et al. (2000) and Craven et al. (2003).
Table 1: Main reason for leaving school before completing Year 12 (a), 1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason(b)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work-related reasons</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little difference to job prospects</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got (or wanted) a job or apprenticeship</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Schooling-related reasons(c)</strong></td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not do well or failed subjects</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not like school or teachers</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost interest or motivation</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal, family or other reasons(d)</strong></td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own ill-health, injury or disability</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reasons</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) 15-24 year olds only.
(b) Respondents nominated one reason only.
(c) Includes people who gave other schooling-related reasons.
(d) Includes people who gave other personal or family reasons.

Source: Education and Training Experience, Australia, 1997 (ABS Cat. no. 6278.0).

The second most common reason students give for early leaving is directly related to their experiences of school. About 15 percent of all leavers in the ABS study stated this explicitly, saying that they left school because they did not like school or did not like teachers (see Table 2). If those who leave school because they are failing or do not do well are added to those who simply don’t like school and those who claim to have lost interest or motivation, it appears that approximately one in three of all early leavers do not find school a happy or satisfying place to be. According to these findings, young people will not stay at school if they are having a miserable time, are failing academically, or are in trouble with teachers. These students will leave school even if they are not able to find work or do not have other education and training opportunities to go to (Fine, 1991; King, 1999; Spierings, 1999).

Some students leave school because of curriculum and program issues. Some drop out because school does not offer the course they want to do, and because the courses that are offered are not relevant or of interest to them. Lamb, Dwyer and Wynn (2000) found that up to 15 per cent of early leavers report that their main reason for leaving school was to do training or study not available at their school. A recent survey of 1125 Year 9 and 10 students in Queensland secondary schools found that a lack of curriculum choice in the lower secondary school leads some students to lose heart, believing that high school will not offer them the job training they want in order to prepare them for work (Pitman and Herschel, 2002). Taken together, approximately one-third of all early leavers say the main reason they left school was because they did not like it, they were not doing well, or that they had lost interest or motivation to continue (ABS, 2000). If the first major motive for early leaving is the desire to work, then the second major factor is the desire to get away from school.
The third major set of reasons for not continuing in school relate to family and personal related factors. Table 2 suggests that approximately 16 percent of early leavers tend to give ‘other’ reasons for leaving school. This should not be dismissed as a ‘miscellaneous’ group, for buried within it we find young people who are among the most disadvantaged in our society. So extreme are their disadvantages that many of them are homeless, some become habitual truants, some become juvenile offenders, and many leave the school system before reaching the legal leaving age.

Numerous official inquiries have been conducted by high-level bodies including Parliamentary Committees, and State and Commonwealth departments into the causes and consequences of youth homelessness and juvenile crime (Beresford, 1993). These inquiries overwhelmingly have found that homeless students and juvenile offenders came from families that are very poor, or families where domestic violence is not uncommon. In some cases these young people have been victims of sexual abuse. Early leaving occurs most frequently where there is poverty, transience and ill-health. Where a family is poor and affected by illness or mental health problems, older siblings often carry out parental roles. Erratic school enrolment patterns, high mobility between schools, and broken attendance means that a good deal of school time is lost. A downward spiral in academic achievement follows and this in turn leads to low academic self-esteem and disengagement from school (Beresford, 1993; Fine, 1991). Some young people are homeless but still attempt to stay on at school. Others may be wards of the state, or orphaned refugee minors. Some young women fall pregnant and become mothers while they are still school students. While this group might represent a relatively small proportion of the overall student population, the probability that they will not make it to year 12 is much higher than for other students in less disadvantaged categories.

**Differences across groups**

While similar themes recur, the reasons young people give for leaving school early vary across different groups of students. There is a great deal of variation in the specific balance of student motives, depending on whether the student is an under-age leaver, leaves at the end of Year 10, during Year 11, or later. Motives also vary depending on where students come from (urban leavers tend to differ from early leavers in remote and rural areas). Gender plays a role in the balance of motives, for the work motive tends to have a greater pull on boys than on girls. Indigenous students, homeless students, and the very poor have a somewhat different balance of motives.

Among the poor, for example, ‘school’ tends to be the dominant reason for early leaving. Work undertaken for the evaluation of the impact of Youth Allowance (YA) found that when students on YA were asked why they left school before Year 12, they most frequently focused on negative aspects of school. Many emphasised course-related concerns (Lamb & Johnson, 2000). The frequency with which school related issues were raised was much higher among those on YA than for the general population of early leavers (Lamb & Johnson, 2000). This finding is consistent with previous analyses of LSAY data based on the Y95 cohort in 1998. Using these data Lamb (2000) showed that among early school leavers who received government income support after leaving school, negative experiences of school — a lack of achievement and advice from teachers suggesting they should leave — were more influential in their decision to drop out of school before completing Year 12 than those reasons were among early school leavers who were not on Youth Allowance (Lamb, 2000).

It is possible to summarize the major reasons young people give for leaving school early under three main headings: work-related aspirations, low interest in school, and unmet survival needs. These reasons for leaving school are represented schematically in the model presented in Figure 1 (from Lamb et al, 2004). This model connects these reasons for leaving to the factors that lie behind them: employment-related factors, school-related factors, and family and personal factors.
Although the main drivers of early leaving are presented as separate in this model, they are likely to be interrelated. When a teenager aspires to leave school to get a job or earn an income, this tests the relevance of the high school curriculum. A curriculum that focuses largely on academic subjects designed mainly to prepare some students for University entry is likely to be seen by other students (especially those with direct workplace aspirations) as boring, irrelevant, and difficult. Despite the interactions between the two different motives for leaving, it is important to recognize that these can also operate separately: students who leave early for work are not always low achievers, and not all low achievers decide to give up school for a job.

Figure 1: A conceptual model of the reasons young people give for leaving school early

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment-related factors</th>
<th>School-related factors</th>
<th>Family and Personal factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Economic Strategies -</td>
<td>Work aspirations (+)</td>
<td>Unmet Survival Needs (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early entry to work</td>
<td>Low interest in Schoolwork (-)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the job training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advancement via experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement falls because of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on academic program and University entrance goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer of limited subject choices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk of failure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homelessness, pregnancy, mental health problems, ill health of parents, absenteeism, mobility and instability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tertiary-entrance focus of the senior secondary curriculum raises complex issues that have been debated endlessly over the past 30 years. Comprehensive public high schools aim to offer all students who come to them a ‘fair go’ at completing a full secondary education. These schools offer a ‘fair’ chance, but never an ‘equal’ chance, since nothing can erase the advantages of having well-educated parents when it comes to feeling fully ‘at home’ with the academic curriculum of the high school. It is not surprising that students from the poorest families mostly say they are leaving school for ‘course-related reasons’. Some states, for example Queensland and Victoria, attempt to respond
to the difficulties poorer students encounter by offering year 11 and 12 academic subjects such as English and Social Science and Mathematics at two levels: at a ‘difficult’ level for those who are seeking tertiary admission, and at a ‘more accessible’ level for students who are seeking to gain a year 12 qualification but are not aiming to enter a University. In NSW, this approach has not been strongly supported (Vickers & Lamb, 2002; McGaw, 1997).

While the structure and content of the senior curriculum continues to cause concern, some states have now broadened their focus and are reviewing their programs for the middle years. In 2002, Pitman and Herschel studied a large sample of Queensland students in years 8 and 9 in public, Catholic and private secondary schools, using both surveys and semi-structured interviews. One conclusion of their investigation was that many young students were unaware that the senior curriculum included accredited-vocational-studies (VET). Interviews with these students suggested that they would remain on in school if they could study ‘something relevant’. The absence of VET from the junior curriculum led many of them to believe that school was only about academic study, and that it would never meet their needs in terms of preparation for the workforce (Pitman and Herschel, 2002). Queensland is now considering offering ‘taster’ VET in year 9, and allowing students to accumulate credits toward a VET certificate from the beginning of year 10. Some other states (South Australia and Western Australia particularly) are considering similar reforms.

As noted, a wide range of factors influence early leaving, and there is no single approach that will work with all students. Some of the best school-based initiatives involve an integrated approach, providing support and guidance while also addressing students’ welfare and personal needs. In targeting those at-risk of dropping out, many of these programs address such issues as histories of failure, low self-esteem, and lack of family support. Youth mentoring, case management, and continuity of staffing are key features of some of the more successful youth support programs. Plan-it-Youth is a well-known youth mentoring program in NSW, operating in public high schools across the state.

Plan-it-Youth provides mentoring support for students who are potential early leavers. It creates a supportive relationship between young people and their adult mentors, aiming to re-engage young people with school and helping them re-evaluate their options in terms of their educational and employment futures. Currently, Plan-it-Youth operates in six School Education Areas (SEAs) across NSW. Coordinators, employed by NSW-DET, work with several schools in each of these SEAs, identifying students who might benefit from mentoring and who wish to join the program. They link them with mentors, and support the mentors at all stages. Students are mentored one-on-one every week by volunteer mentors who have completed an accredited training program delivered by a local TAFE institute.

While there are many youth mentoring programs, there are relatively few rigorous, well-controlled evaluations assessing their effectiveness. A number of carefully-constructed US studies of mentoring programs have been conducted in recent years (see for example, Evans, 1992; McPartland & Nettles, 1991; and Cave & Quint, 1990). These studies found that young people who participated in strongly implemented mentoring programs were less likely to drop out, had better school attendance records, and better grades. One study found that participants had higher educational aspirations than similar student who had not been mentored, and another followed mentored students into the workplace, and found that they did better in terms of positive employer reports and early promotion than students who had not been mentored.

A follow-up study of 315 students who participated in NSW Plan-it-Youth during 2003 found that 88 percent of them had positive destinations in April 2004. 70 percent were still in school, 7 percent
had gained an apprenticeship, and 11 percent were either in full-time work or TAFE or some combination of TAFE and work. Although this was not a controlled experimental study, these results represent a better set of outcomes than might be expected, given the profiles of the students who enter Plan-it-Youth.

2. Supporting further learning and managing effective transitions

This section explores what is increasingly a blurred boundary between school and work. Some early leavers may have the good fortune to find a stable job or enter an apprenticeship: they will not be seen again in the school corridors. Others will be gone but will be back again when their hoped-for career ‘goes bung’. To respond to such students, some South Australian schools, mostly around Adelaide, have been converted into re-entry high schools. These invite any student who has been out of school for six months or more to return on a part-time basis. It is expected that most students entering these schools will be working part-time, so the timetables are flexible and there are many night classes. There are no uniforms and the environment is an ‘adult’ one, but at the same time, these schools offer support and guidance and help students deal with welfare problems and income support needs. Across Australia, there are many situations where an approach like this may be desirable, but few high schools have the institutional flexibility to support students who are seeking flexible combinations of education and work.

An important initiative designed to respond to the blurring of the boundaries between school and work was the Full Service Schools Program (FSS). This national program was established by the Commonwealth government in the latter half of the 1990s following the introduction of the Youth Allowance scheme. It funded initiatives in every State and Territory, aiming to encourage young people to remain in school until the end of Year 12, or to return to school if their initial transition to work had not been successful. Unfortunately the Commonwealth discontinued this program, but an evaluation done at the time (DETYA, 2001) found that:

- a whole-school approach was more successful than situations where projects relied on individuals or small groups of teachers or staff;
- successful collaboration with community agencies for delivery of health and other social services depended on well-grounded agreements between all partners; and
- appropriate identification of students at risk of early leaving and their individual needs was fundamental to the targeting of services.

The Commonwealth Government spent over $20 million establishing the FSS program but did not set it up on a permanent basis. Although FSS funding was discontinued, several initiatives emerged soon after. In effect, some of the successful FSS programs survived and were transformed into locally-supported initiatives. While these continue to fulfill critically important functions, helping many young people through risky and complex periods of their lives, their survival depends on continual grant writing in order to achieve the necessary funds. One example of such an initiative is the Macarthur Youth Commitment (MYC), which grew out of the Campbelltown FSS. Initially, MYC was supported by a seed grant from the Dusseldorp Skills Forum,. It is currently funded through a three-year grant from the NSW Department of Transport and Regional Services (DoTARs).

**Macarthur Youth Commitment** keeps track of young people who need support. It sustains effective collaborations and partnerships with a network of community agencies, including Centrelink, the Police, employer organizations, and local high schools. It employs transition brokers who work with schools, employers, families and welfare support groups. Through the MYC case-management system, many students who are on the edge of dropping out of school are coaxed into staying, many who leave for TAFE are mentored as they enter this less custodial environment, some return from employment to re-enter high school, while others make an effective transition into work.
One of the core concepts driving programs such as MYC is that the most vulnerable young people in our society need continued mentoring and support as they negotiate the blurred boundary between school and work. Their transitions need to be ‘managed’ and this is best done by coordinating the efforts of several community agencies. It cannot be done by schools alone.

In the ACT, the case management system known as STAIRS provides in-school support and links to outside agencies for approximately 200 at-risk youth. In certain targeted high schools in NSW, the Department of Education and Training provides case management for students through the Gateways program. In South Australia, school-based mentors and Department of Human Services staff work together to provide case management services for at-risk students. Queensland has adopted an all-of-Government approach which means that 100 Youth Support Coordinators, employed by the Department of Families, are being located in high schools to carry out case management and transition broker functions. In this context, high schools serving disadvantaged communities tend to function as community hubs (Spierings, 2001).

In Victoria, transition planning systems are known as Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs). In theory, MIPs is implemented in every public secondary school in Victoria, but it is implemented more intensively in communities where needs are high. Another Victorian initiative is the development of local area partnerships that aim to increase the level of coordination across different government agencies. These are known as Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) and they operate at a local or regional level, as bodies answerable to the Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission. Through the LLENs, local high schools, TAFEs, Adult Education Centres, as well as local branches of both State and Commonwealth agencies work together to help young people. The LLENs may also elicit participation from local employers in providing training and job opportunities for youth (Curtain, 2002).

**Case management, career education, and transition support**

Evidence regarding the effectiveness of case management transition support programs is mounting, yet it is also clear that they can be costly. Policy makers therefore need define as clearly as possible who should carry out these programs, how their roles should be defined, and which groups of students should be targeted to receive them.

Since the success of these programs derives from the provision of comprehensive and personalised services to small groups or classes of students, it is a challenge to provide such interventions on a system-wide basis. Continuity is essential to program success, so it preferable that intensive systems of case management be focused on that small set of schools with the highest concentrations of difficult cases.

The MCEEYTA inquiry into early leaving (Lamb et al, 2004) found some variation in the relationships between case managers and transition brokers across Australia. In South Australia, for example, case managers seem to form the core of the system. School-based case managers aim to make sure that the services a student needs are accessible, coordinated and monitored. Case managers may refer a student to resources and staff within the high school, or to welfare or medical resources outside of the school, as needed. The fact that in SA, schools are embedded in the Department of Education and Children’s Services may mean that cross-agency links are easier to achieve in this context. In other states, the case manager and transition broker roles are distinct, so that transition brokers work outside of schools to support early leavers who are trying to find a start in the workplace, or to help them re-enter the education and training system. At the same time, these transition brokers must work in close liaison with in-school case managers or student mentors. In cities as large and complex as Sydney where liaison between government and community
agencies is not always strong, the combination of and in-school mentor and an out-of-school transition broker would seem appropriate (see Boxes, MYC and Plan it Youth).

It is not clear how supportive career educators are in relation to young people who disengage from school at an early age. Findings from the classic study by Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963) have been supported by subsequent research (eg, Audas and Willms, 2001). This line of research suggests that, in general, students who are low achievers feel less satisfied with the career education system than high achievers. It is not clear that these findings apply in the Australian setting, but it is important to ascertain to what extent career educators focus on advising high-flyers on their University options, and to what extent they provide effective guidance for those who are more vulnerable to early leaving and unsatisfactory transitions.

Conclusions

Three imperatives emerge from the literature and case studies reviewed in this paper. First, it is important that transition workers, teachers, and parents do all they can to reduce student disengagement, but this work needs to begin no later than the junior secondary years. If the problem in not addressed until year 10 or 11, many students will either have left already or be so disengaged that it will be too late to turn them around. Second, the most vulnerable young people in our society need continued support as they negotiate the blurred boundary between school and work. Their transitions need to be ‘managed’ and this is best done by coordinating the efforts of several community agencies. It cannot be done by schools alone. And third, youth mentoring programs appear to have powerful positive effects on students who are at risk of early leaving. It seems that mentoring can often re-engage young people with school or orient them towards productive combinations of work and further education.

References


Marks, G. & N. Fleming (1999), Early School Leaving in Australia, Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne


