1.0 Executive Summary

1.1 Background

TNS and Monarch Consulting[1] were commissioned to undertake a consultation exercise for the Ministry of Education (the Ministry) exploring the views of students, caregivers, schools and other school sector stakeholders about the drivers of early-leaving decisions, and the factors that might encourage greater school-student retention.

1.2 Summary of Findings

Students at Risk of Leaving School Early

Most students who are at risk of leaving school before the age of 16 are identifiable, with around three-quarters of principals (76%) believing that students who leave school before the age of 16 have similar attributes or experiences, and nearly all principals (91%) believing there are typical warning signs for identifying students at risk.

The similar attributes and experiences mentioned by principals are disengagement (43%), low achievement (35%), dysfunctional family (34%), lack of family support (30%) and a lack of social skills (24%). The warning signs for identifying students at risk are truancy (67%), disengaged attitudes (48%), disruptive (35%), lack of family support (25%) and negative out of school behaviour (19%).

Early school leavers corroborate the principal's views to a large extent in terms of being disengaged (as evidenced by most early leavers being truant at least weekly (72%), and most going to school/classes late [70%]) and having issues at home (29%) such as parents separating (involving a custody battle), a death in the family, transience (i.e. constantly moving area/school), alcohol and drug related issues, students having to care for/support family members (by staying at home and/or working), abusive parents (verbally and physically) and financial issues resulting in poor living conditions.

The underlying causes for low academic achievement may include students falling behind in school work, finding school difficult, and having literacy and numeracy issues. Over half (56%) of the early school leavers said they had fallen behind in their school work (because of truancy, sickness, moving around – both houses and schools) and found it hard to catch up. Half the early leavers (50%) found school hard, and around half (46%) said they had either literacy (25%) or numeracy issues (25%), with 13 percent of early leavers saying they had both.

A point of difference between principals and early school leavers is that 45 percent of early school leavers say their teacher wanted them to leave school compared to only 16 percent of principals saying some teachers wanted students to leave.

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[1] Monarch Consulting contributed the services of an experienced education policy advisor to assist with project set-up, reviewing research instruments, and reviewing and contributing to the development of the research report.

Barriers to Retaining At Risk Students

The factors seen by principals as barriers to student retention can be categorised as those relating to:

- Students as individuals (e.g. attitudes [disengaged, not wanting to be at school][2], disruptive behaviour).

- The student's family or external support network.

- The school's offering to the student (e.g. the curriculum, relevance of subjects).

- Resources (e.g. specialised staff[3], funding for co-curricular activities and high student to staff ratio).

- Teachers (e.g. struggling to cope with meeting the diverse needs of students, a lack of effective teaching - specifically, 'soft skills' such as connecting with the students, engaging them, managing the classroom and teaching to different levels within the classroom).

Supporting Student Retention

A number of things were identified as necessary to encourage students to stay at school. These include curriculum adaptation (external courses and work experience), making school relevant to at risk students, extra academic support (catch-up tuition), interagency connections, building linkages to family and community, attendance management, teacher training (as noted above) and provision of health and social services to deal with risk indicators early.

The most effective things that principals say their school does to keep students at school until age 16 include curriculum adaptation (49%), provide work experience (24%) and encourage family involvement (22%).

It should be noted that early leaving exemptions are regarded as necessary for schools to have for use in extreme cases (e.g. violence to other students or teachers), and also for use with early leavers who have a genuine opportunity to undertake a pathway (employment or study) that will provide them with realistic future employment opportunities[4].

Suggestions to improve the process of obtaining an early leaving exemption include making the process harder for the student (important in supporting students who might otherwise drop out) and closer monitoring of students once they have left[5].

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[2] Students may be disengaged for a number of reasons including learning difficulties (literacy and numeracy issues).

[3] Includes guidance, pastoral, careers staff and remedial teachers.

[4] One in ten principals (11%) surveyed agree that if a student wants to leave school early (at age 15), and their parents/caregivers agree, then an exemption should be granted automatically.

[5] Monitoring to ensure the early leavers are still in employment or studying – 16 percent of early school leavers surveyed for this consultation exercise were neither working nor studying.

Supporting Schools to Encourage Student Retention

Over two-thirds of principals (69%) agree there is scope to develop new incentives to encourage schools to retain students to the age of 16. However, not all principals agree that all students should be retained until the age of 16 (20% of principals do not believe that the benefits of keeping disruptive students at school who want to leave means that every effort should be made to ensure that they stay at school until the age of 16, and 37% of principals think that keeping students at school who want to leave causes more problems than benefits).

The majority of principals (80%) believe the Ministry can help schools to encourage greater student retention[6] through additional resources (e.g. funding for teachers (72%), for co-curricular activities (63%), for attendance management (57%) and 'other' funding (24%) such as mental health services and programmes to help 'at risk' students). Principals were also interested in assistance to make inter-agency connections (61%), with the most frequently mentioned agencies being CYFs (40%), the Police (19%) and Work and Income (19%)[7]. Around a fifth of principals (23%) also wanted advice (e.g. on successful programmes and support avenues).

1.3 Consultation Exercise[8]

As part of the consultation, the following occurred:

- An online survey of 123 principals.

- A telephone survey of 330 students who had been granted an early leaving exemption.

- A series of in-depth interviews[9] with principals, teachers, guidance counsellors, key personnel in the education sectors, early school leavers, and parents/caregivers of early school leavers.

1.3.1 Early School Leaver Profile

Of the early school leavers surveyed, over six out of ten (62%) were male and over a third were female (38%). Over half of early school leavers identified as New Zealand European/Pakeha (55%), over a third identified as Māori (38%), five percent identified as Pacific and two percent as 'other'. Half of early school leavers live in the upper North Island (52%), a quarter live in the lower North Island (22%) and a quarter live in the South Island (26%).

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[6] The following support measures were shown in the questionnaire and the principals were asked to indicate whether they thought they were something the Ministry of Education could do to support their school.

[7] Caution, small base size (n=57).

[8] A detailed methodology section is appended to this report.

[9] A total of n=41 in-depth interviews were undertaken; this is sizeable for a qualitative study. Please note one of the main limitations of qualitative research is that (unlike quantitative research) it is not generaliseable to the wider population.

1.3.2 Principal Profile

The principals who completed the online survey were from a range of schools around the country. Just over two-fifths (41%) of principals come from schools in the upper North Island (above Hawkes Bay), 27 percent from the lower North Island (Hawkes Bay and below) and 32 percent from the South Island. The decile ratings of the schools the principals were from are evenly split between low (28%), medium (35%) and high (35%) deciles[10]. Around six out of ten principals (59%) come from schools with between 201 to 900 students[11], and around a fifth come from schools smaller than 200 students (19%) or more than 900 students (23%).

1.4 Research Objectives

The research addressed a series of objectives. These objectives, along with a brief synopsis of the main findings for each objective, are outlined below.

1.5 Barriers to Student Retention

Objective One: Identification of the factors that are seen by schools as barriers to retaining students at school to the age of 16.

The factors seen by principals as barriers to student retention can be categorised as:

- Those relating to the **student as an individual**, specifically the

    - attitude of students (disengaged, disruptive, etc) (76% of principals 'agree' or 'agree strongly' that this is a factor)
    - suitability of some students to mainstream education (54%)
    - personal suitability of students to school (38%).

- Those relating to the **student's family or external support network**

    - 59 percent of principals agree ('agree' or 'agree strongly') that a barrier to retaining students is a lack of parent/caregiver support
    - 58 percent of principals agree that a barrier to retaining students is a lack of external professional support for students at risk of leaving school.

- Those relating to the **school's offering to the student**

    - one of the main barriers some principals say they face in trying to keep students at school is the curriculum (46%), e.g. curriculum not being suited to all students or being unable to provide the wide range of courses needed so there is something that is relevant to everyone.[12]

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[10] Two percent of schools had a '99' decile rating.
[11] Principals were only asked to include students Year 9 and above.
[12] This question asked principals to spontaneously mention what was the main barrier their school faces in trying to keep students at school.

- Those relating to **resources**

    - 61 percent of principals agree ('agree' or 'agree strongly') that a barrier to retaining students is a lack of specialised staff[13] who are able to support students at risk of leaving school
    - 42 percent of principals agree that lack of funding for co-curricular activities is a barrier to student retention
    - 33 percent of principals agree that a barrier to retaining students is a high student to staff ratio.

- Those relating to **teachers**

    - 27 percent of principals agree that a fair number of teachers at their school struggle to cope with meeting the diverse needs of students
    - from the qualitative research, there was an indication that a barrier to student retention was a lack of effective teaching (specifically, 'soft skills' such as connecting with the students, engaging them, managing the classroom and teaching to different levels within the classroom).

1.6 Supporting Student Retention

Objective Two: Identification of the factors that support student retention that are seen by schools as working well.

Inclusive and innovative practices appear to make a difference. The most effective things that principals say their school does to keep students at school until age 16 include curriculum adaptation (49%), work experience (24%) and encouraging family involvement (22%). Other practices that were noted by principals as supporting student retention were staff involvement (19%), developing career programmes (13%) and extra-curricular activities (12%)[14].

The following are examples of practices to support student retention that were reported as working well in schools:

- **Prior identification of existing issues** – whereby schools actively seek academic and background information on each student entering year nine. This is done in order to identify any existing issues (e.g. literacy, behavioural) so that school can put measures in place to address these.

- **Dealing with literacy and numeracy issues** – provide additional literacy and numeracy support within the learning environment for less competent students. This is done in order to bring students up to a level of competency that enables them to effectively participate in the learning process, thus preventing disengagement.

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[13] Includes guidance, pastoral, careers staff and remedial teachers.
[14] All these factors were spontaneously mentioned by principals.

- **Getting to know the student** – the school (principal, deputy principal, dean) meets with all students entering the school. This enables the school to provide the most engaging curriculum for each student based on their needs and interests. This is also an effective first step in building a relationship between the school, the student and the student's family.

- **Recognise that there are other pathways beyond the academic** – schools offer more trade/career oriented learning options to those students for whom an academic pathway is less relevant. Students who find school relevant to their future goal are less inclined to leave early.

- **Goal setting** – schools help students with goal setting for their life through exposure to potential futures – realities of tertiary student life, trades, or professions. The school provides encouragement to reach those goals. This is done to make the outcome of school more tangible and therefore relevant to the student.

- **Encourage good relationships between teachers and students** – listening to and talking with students, providing encouragement and positive reinforcement, and building realistic expectations develops good relationships between students and teachers. This demonstrates the school's interest in the student, making them feel like a valued member of the school community.

- **Ongoing professional development of teachers** – whereby the school culture actively encourages teachers' continued professional development, demonstrated by providing access to support networks that facilitate this. This equips teachers with the skills to create a more engaging learning environment and one within which students want to remain.

- **Continuity of 'adult' contact** – provide students access to an adult (e.g. teacher, guidance counsellor, community leader) for the duration of students' school-based education, not just for the crisis points. This person will reinforce 'positive' behaviours that may otherwise be lacking in the student's life, while encouraging the student to remain within the educational system.

- **Health support** – whereby schools facilitate access to health services for students (and their families). This is done to remove health issues as a barrier to learning.

- **Targeted support** – whereby schools identify specific areas where support within the wider community would engender greater engagement with schools and education. By creating a tangible value to education within the community, parents/caregivers are less likely to support student withdrawal from education.

- **Multi-systemic support** – when necessary schools involve other agencies (e.g. the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services (CYFs), Family Planning doctors, Police, district truancy services) so that families do not feel isolated and unsupported when there are problems.

- **Community Liaison** – where schools are supported by, or employ, community liaison officers who visit with families to help identify and understand issues and involve the wider community in school activities. This is done to make the school environment more welcoming and inclusive.

1.7 Encouraging Greater Retention

Objective Three: Identification of the factors that would encourage schools to encourage greater student retention.

Over two-thirds of principals (69%) agree there is scope to develop new incentives to encourage schools to retain students to the age of 16.

The majority of principals (80%) believe the Ministry can help schools to encourage greater student retention by[15]:

- Providing funding for teachers (72%).

- Providing funding for co-curricular activities (63%).

- Helping to make inter-agency connections (61%). The most frequently mentioned agencies were:

    - CYFs (40%)
    - Police (19%)
    - Work and Income (19%)[16].

- Providing funding for attendance management (57%).

- Providing other funding (24%), e.g. for mental health services and programmes to help 'at risk' students.

- Giving schools advice (23%), e.g. on successful programmes and support avenues.

A range of other suggestions was also given, including: specialist teachers, social workers, funding for outside education, and raising the perceptions (i.e. value) of education.

1.8 Why Students are Leaving School Early

Objective Four: Identification of the factors that are associated with decisions to leave school before turning 16 by students.

Early school leavers appear to have a lot in common, including being regular truants, struggling academically, difficult home lives, perceptions of 'exclusive' school environments, and being attracted to leave by money or friends outside of school, which can all be components of their disengagement.

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[15] The following support measures were shown in the questionnaire and the principals were asked to indicate whether they thought they were something the Ministry of Education could do to support their school.
[16] Caution, small base size (n=57).

Three quarters of principals (76%) believe students who leave school early have similar attributes or experiences. The most frequently mentioned attributes or experiences by principals were disengagement, low achievement and having a dysfunctional family.[17] This is corroborated by the experiences of early school leavers:

- Disengagement (mentioned spontaneously by 43% of principals). Early leavers substantiate this; of those surveyed, most had been truant (79%), most were truant at least weekly (72%), and most went to school/classes late (70%).

- Low achievement (mentioned spontaneously by 35% of principals)[18]. Half the early leavers (50%) surveyed said they found school hard, and over half (56%) said they had fallen behind in their school work and found it hard to catch up. Around half (46%) said they had either literacy (25%) or numeracy issues (25%), with 13 percent of early leavers saying they had both.

- Dysfunctional family (mentioned spontaneously by 34% of principals). A similar number of early leavers said they had issues at home (29%).

Related to the attributes and experiences of early school leavers, principals also say the following are factors in students leaving before aged 16[19]:

- Issues at home disrupting students' routine (79%).

- Parents/caregivers placing little value on education (69%).

- Students falling too far behind (as a result of truancy or other reason) (67%).

- Drug and alcohol issues (58%).

- Academic issues (51%).

When asked an open-ended question about their reasons for leaving, the top five reasons given by early school leavers can be categorised into 'push' (elements inside the school that encourage students to leave) and 'pull' (elements outside the school that entice students to leave) factors. On balance, the 'push' factors[20] (55%) rather than the 'pull' factors[21] (35%) were most often given as reasons for leaving school by early school leavers[22].

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[17] These responses were unprompted.
[18] From the qualitative research, it was identified that low achievement leads to disengagement unless strategies are enacted to enable the student to *"reach their own level of potential".*
[19] The qualitative research also supports this.
[20] Push factors were: a poor or bad classroom environment (17%), not liking school (13%), finding school uninteresting or boring (12%), and being stood down/expelled (12%).
[21] Pull factors were: to work or have money (18%) and to do training or an apprenticeship (16%).
[22] This question allowed multiple responses; therefore percentages will not add to100.

When provided with a list of possible factors[23] relating to their reasons for leaving, the top five reasons given by early school leavers as to why they decided to leave school are (prompted reasons):

- They wanted to leave (92% said this was a factor).

- Knew what they wanted to do when they left (63%).

- Were accepted into a course or apprenticeship (53%).

- Felt school wanted them to leave (45%)[24].

- Had a full-time job (30%).

1.9 Encouraging Students to stay at School

Objective Five: Identification of the factors that may have encouraged these students to stay at school.

As summarised below, apart from more funding for teachers[25], there is also a reported need for curriculum adaptation (external courses and work experience), making school relevant to at risk students, extra academic support (catch-up tuition), interagency connections, building linkages to family and community, attendance management, teacher training and provision of health and social services to dealing with risk indicators early.

Curriculum adaptation

- 76 percent of principals agree that having an alternative school curriculum that is more flexible (e.g. offers options like work and part-time study) is important in supporting students who might otherwise drop out.

- 73 percent of early school leavers say they would have stayed at school if they could do school part-time and also work towards something else like an apprenticeship or course.

- 60 percent of early school leavers say they would have stayed at school if they could work part-time and study part-time.[26]

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[23] Early leavers were read a series of statements and asked if each was true or false for them (refer to student questionnaire appended). Note, the qualitative research found similar results.

[24] Note – this is in contrast with principals who state that 16 percent of teachers want the students to leave.

[25] As reported by principals. More funding for teachers includes having more teachers (in order to have a lower student to staff ratio in the classroom), having specialist teachers (increased numbers and full-time) such as remedial teachers, guidance and careers teachers, also having more teacher aides.

[26] Of those early school leavers who are doing full-time or part-time study elsewhere (53%), nearly all (97%) like it.

Make school more relevant to at risk students

- Qualitative findings indicated that students who could see no tangible connection between the school curriculum and their career goals or skills required for daily life (where they had no goals) could not see the point of staying at school.

- Over two thirds of early school leavers (69%) say they would have stayed at school if the school was more flexible to their needs.

- 72 percent of early school leavers say they would have stayed if they only had to do subjects they liked.

- 71 percent of principals agree that getting students involved in sports or other extra-curricular activities is important in supporting students who might otherwise drop out. Some early school leavers say they would have stayed at school if they had more friendships/social activities at school (17%).

- Some early school leavers say they would have stayed at school if the subjects were more interesting/entertaining/fun (11%), and if they had more subject choices (8%)[27].

Extra academic support (catch-up tuition)

- 59 percent of principals think offering extra academic help for students (internal or external) is important in supporting students who might otherwise drop out.

Inter-agency connections

- 70 percent of principals think greater inter-agency support is important in supporting students who might otherwise drop out.

- Provision of health is seen as a benefit by families, thus serving as an effective incentive to send their children to school. Principals reported increased student retention in schools where there is easy and confidential access to health services (mother and child units, substance abuse clinics, family planning, STI clinics).

- School liaison with and access to social services, provides opportunity for issues outside the school environment which are hindering retention to be addressed by skilled professionals.

- This enables schools to concentrate on creating a positive learning environment for students, by freeing up time that is otherwise spent addressing the issues of the minority.

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[27] These responses were unprompted.

Building linkages to family and community

- Principals try to overcome student retention issues by having family involvement (36%)[28].

- Two thirds of principals (66%) agree that teaching the value of education not just to students, but to the wider community and parents is important in supporting students who might otherwise drop out.

Attendance management

- 57 percent of principals said they would like funding for attendance management.

Teacher training

- The qualitative findings indicated that principals, teachers and students identified that not all teachers have the 'soft' skills required to connect meaningfully with their students, particularly **relationship** building:

  - relationship building – find out what is important to the student, and what else is going on with students' lives
  - understanding current teenagers – methods and means of communication have changed (text, e-mail), participation in community (face to face, via the internet) and expectations have changed since teachers were their students' age, teachers need to know how and where to access the resources/advice to make the learning environment relevant
  - supportive behaviours – actively seek solutions to problems/issues with the students rather than place the issues in the 'too hard basket'
  - communication skills – listening to and talking with students.

- Over half these early leavers also say that they would have stayed at school if they had more support from teachers to stay (57%).

- Some early school leavers say they would have stayed at school if the teachers were more likeable/fun (9%).[29]

Provision of health and social services

- Educators agree that students who are mentally and physically healthy are better equipped to learn but not all students' home environments ensure physical and mental health.

- Provision of health is seen as a benefit by families, thus serving as an effective incentive to send their children to school. Principals reported increased student retention in schools where there is easy and confidential access to health services (mother and child units, substance abuse clinics, family planning, STI clinics).

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[28] This is an unprompted response.
[29] Unprompted response from an open-ended question.

School liaison with and access to social services, provides opportunity for issues outside the school environment which are hindering retention to be addressed by skilled professionals.

- This enables schools to concentrate on creating a positive learning environment for students, by freeing up time that is otherwise spent addressing the issues of the minority.

Dealing with risk indicators early

- Nearly all the principals (91%) agree there are typical warning signs of students at risk of leaving school. These signs are: truancy (67%), disengaged attitudes (48%) and disruptive behaviours (35%).[30]

- The qualitative research indicated that, in order to mediate the risks, it is important to act on the warning signs early (or pre-empt them). In addition to the practices that are effective in retaining students who might otherwise be at risk of leaving early (as listed in objective two), other suggested options to dealing with the risk factors are:

  - develop monitoring, assessment and response guidance tools for secondary schools to use relative to risk indicators (such as truancy, behaviour problems or poor achievement)
  - attendance management – some effective practices reported were acting quickly on truancy, e.g. within two hours of students not attending school, parents are contacted. However, attendance management is perceived to take up too much of the school's time
  - parental involvement – meet with parents to address issues with students in a non-threatening and culturally sensitive way, directly with teachers or via community liaison officers, so as to understand 'where the family is coming from'. Provide adult literacy and life skills classes to demonstrate to parents the tangible benefits of education
  - inter-agency support.

1.10 Key Findings and Information to Assist Options Development

1.9.1 Literacy and Numeracy 'Catch-up' Tuition

One of the factors associated with leaving school early was students falling behind in their school work and/or finding their school work too difficult[31]. Therefore, additional tuition support may be required to assist students to catch-up or to cope better with their school work.
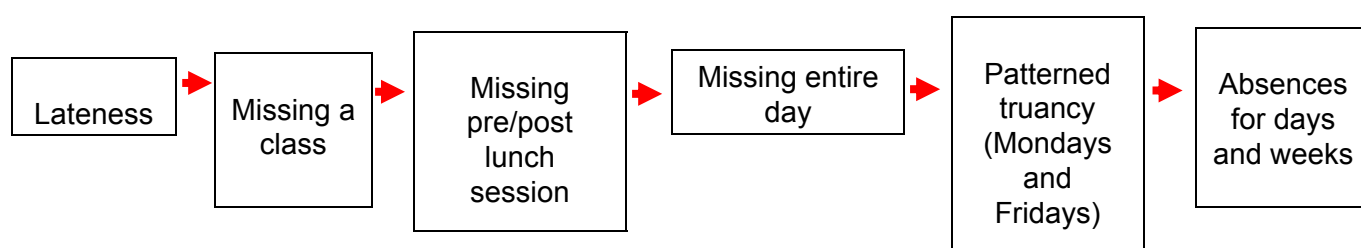
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[30] This was a multiple response question, percentages will not add to 100.
[31] As outlined under research objective four: around half of the early leavers (46%) had either literacy (25%) or numeracy issues (25%), with 16 percent of early leavers having problems with both.

Prior to providing catch-up tuition it would first be necessary to identify the students who are having learning issues. As mentioned earlier, a successful practice (as identified by principals) for doing this is the Year 9 interview of students (to identify any prior issues from primary and intermediate). Some schools also mentioned teachers need to be equipped to recognise children with learning issues, e.g. literacy issue or English language skills, dyslexia or slow learner (i.e. whether something is a symptom or a cause).

1.9.2 Student Engagement/Disengagement

As shown by the research there are common risk indicators for disengagement. Truancy is the most easily identified expression of disengagement, escalating as follows:

| Lateness | → | Missing a class | → | Missing pre/post lunch session | → | Missing entire day | → | Patterned truancy (Mondays and Fridays) | → | Absences for days and weeks |

Actions undertaken to arrest this flow are likely to increase retention.

Disruptive behaviours are the other most easily recognised expressions of disengagement.

Schools (principals and teachers) indicated that, in order to ensure students remain engaged, the following processes and approaches have proved to be helpful:

- Adapting the curriculum (e.g. successful practices have included a personalised approach to curriculum structure so it is more relevant to students' future goals, two days in school with three days in a work environment (e.g. apprenticeship), and sourcing courses outside the school that are relevant to student interests, and distance learning)[32].

- Developing effective relationships with students.

- Getting students involved in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

The following matters raised in the context of student engagement, are addressed in detail elsewhere in this report:

- Literacy and numeracy catch-up tuition for students that are struggling or have fallen behind.

- Promoting and explaining the relevance of subjects (e.g. through industry connections and linking subjects to employment or study outcomes).

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[32] Examples of successful practices mentioned included Gateway and STAR.

- Increased flexibility and innovation to accommodate students' interests and needs (e.g. 'hands-on' work experience, other forms of curriculum adaptation and co- or extra-curricular activities to engender interest and maintain engagement).

- Upskilling teachers on how to develop effective relationships and to engage students.

- Providing opportunities for students to develop other effective relationships – for example, involving other independent adults who may be positive role models or simply available from time to time for students to talk to at school.

1.9.3 Professional Development for Teachers

As noted above, effective relationships with teachers and effective teaching is important for keeping students engaged. Suggestions from the qualitative research about ensuring effective teaching ranged from **pre-service** suggestions to **in-service** suggestions.

Pre-service suggestions included:

- Reviewing the acceptance process of training teachers (e.g. assess potential candidates'suitability and aptitude for teaching as a vocation).

- Reviewing, in the medium to long-term, the curriculum taught at colleges of education and other teacher training facilities – especially for secondary teachers. Specific areas mentioned as requiring attention were strategies for student engagement, relationship building, classroom management, teaching to different levels within a class, and personal resilience).

Post-service suggestions included:

- Ongoing professional development for teachers (it was noted that one off courses are not as valuable as seeing best practice teaching modelled in the classroom).

- Principals presenting and discussing teacher professional development plans with the Board of Trustees.

- Modelling of best practice for establishing good relationships in the classroom between teachers and students.

- Te Kōtahitanga was mentioned by principals as a positive practice (focusing on effective relationships between teachers and students, and recognising that deficit theorising by teachers can be a major impediment to students' educational achievement).

1.9.4 Student Pathways/Careers Advice

Some students are bewildered by the choices they need to make and have no clear idea what to do or where to go to begin to understand what to do next. With these students it is important that there is some intervention to show them what is out there, or else they may just 'give up'.

Effective practices have included taking students to universities to show them what it is like (i.e. 'you can fit in here'), placing students in various workplace environments to understand what working means, and talking with students to understand their interests and use this to discover career options that students may otherwise have never considered.

The research indicates that increasing understanding of the value of education and the relevance of subjects to students' goals and interests may encourage students to stay at school longer[33]. Also it may help to encourage families to better support their children to stay at school.

1.9.5 External Support Required

The research indicates that, in order to support students staying at school, external support is required. This includes support from students' families, interagency connections and community support.

Specific suggestions that were made included:

- A 'multi-systemic' approach to support: facilitating the making of timely and effective connections with other agencies (i.e. both government and non-government – possibly as an extension of the well-regarded Ministry student support service).

- Medical and other health and wellbeing support for students – i.e. either available on-site at the school or visiting/referral services that are 'youth-friendly'.
- Building good home-school relationships. Encourage parental involvement in school (parents and schools working together to keep students in school).

Continuing to promote importance of education in conjunction with these was also seen as important (e.g. through Team Up and Te Mana).

1.9.6 Early Leaving Exemptions

Most principals (70%) think the link between truancy and applying for an early leaving exemption is strong. Truancy is usually a symptom of disengagement with school. In some of these cases early leaving exemptions can be seen as a "get out of jail free" card for schools/students who are unable/unwilling to deal with the root cause of the truancy.

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[33] Around half of the students (48%) felt the subjects they did were stupid and meaningless.

Interestingly, just over a quarter of principals (28%) think the link between the number of stand downs/suspensions and early leaving exemptions is strong or very strong. This is because stand downs/suspensions maintain the dialogue between the student/family and school, which continues the relationship between student/family and school based education, whereas early leaving exemptions is the end of the relationship.

The qualitative research indicated that schools perceive there will always be a need for early leaving exemptions (i.e. in extreme instances where a student has a prolonged history of serious behavioural and learning problems and also for the instances where the student has a genuine opportunity that is likely to produce good outcomes for them).[34] Typically, early leaving exemptions were spoken of as a 'last resort'. There was some concern that once an early leaving exemption was granted that no one then monitored whether or not the early leaver remained in work or at the alternative learning institute.[35]

Around a fifth of principals (23%) think it is important or very important that the process of applying for an early leaving exemption is made harder in order to support students to stay at school who might otherwise apply for an exemption. Given this and the finding that greater interagency support may be required to reduce the numbers of students who leave school early, there are several possible elements or permutations of the approach that could be considered to address these concerns, including:

- Before approving an early leaving exemption, undertaking a thorough review of what has (or has not) been tried to address the issues contributing to the student's desire to leave school.

- Taking steps to ensure that all reasonable options are exhausted before approving an early leaving exemption.

- Increasing knowledge of, access to, and coordination of a full range of government and non-government support services.

- Completing detailed needs assessments and matching services to those needs.[36]

- Taking some of the load off schools – for example, by increasing the capacity of the Ministry's student support teams (which appear to be generally well-regarded).

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[34] 11 percent of principals who think they should be granted automatically if parents ask for them.

[35] Indeed, 16 percent of the early leavers surveyed were currently neither working nor studying.

[36] This is along the same lines as the Ministry recently concluded (in the course of Student Engagement Initiative work) was appropriate for some excluded students to expedite their re-enrolment at another school.