High-quality schooling

Executive Summary

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education is the key to the door

Research shows that high-quality schooling is critical for setting up children and young people for success both in education and for their future life outcomes. This paper covers five aspects of high-quality schooling:

1. Effective teaching and learning.

2. Social and emotional learning and support.

3. Support for school attendance and engagement.

4. Parent engagement in learning.

5. School leadership.

These aspects, underpinned by an explicit commitment to high expectations, combine to create the conditions for high-quality schooling which has the potential to mitigate the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on student achievement, health, wellbeing, and future outcomes.

It should be noted that this report highlights key areas relevant to high-quality schooling in summary and is not a comprehensive review of every aspect of high-quality schooling.

1 Effective teaching and learning

Education is key to breaking cycles of disadvantage and for setting children up for success. Effective teaching and learning is crucially important because:

- Teacher quality is the single most important in-school factor influencing student achievement (Hattie, 2009).

- Key foundational skills are essential for children and young people to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens (ACARA, n.d.).

While there is a consensus that effective teaching and learning contributes significantly to children and young people's development, there is contested evidence and little agreement on what quality schooling looks like (Egert, Fukkink & Eckhardt, 2018; Leu, 2005).

However, the importance of supporting teachers and creating the conditions for learning are consistently highlighted. For example, The Gonski 2.0 Review highlights the importance of:

- Equipping every student with the skills to grow and succeed in a changing world.

- Creating, supporting and valuing expert educators.

- Empowering and supporting school leaders.

- Raising and achieving aspirations through innovation and continuous improvement (Gonski et al., 2018; CESE, 2016).

2 Social and emotional learning and support

There is a substantive and growing evidence base which supports the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) and its role in education (Wigelsworth et al., 2021; Clarke & Waddell, 2018; Pearce et al., 2019; Emerson, et al., 2012; MacCann et al., 2020; Durlak et al., 2011).

Social and emotional skills play a crucial role in children and young people's development and are closely tied to positive outcomes for children and young people's educational attainment and achievement, health and wellbeing, including mental health and their future outcomes (Clarke & Waddell, 2018; OECD, 2015; Taylor et al., 2017; Corcoran, 2018). Social and emotional learning is important in education because:

- There is a strong connection between social and emotional skills and educational attainment and achievement.

- Social and emotional learning has been shown to improve students' mental health.

- Social and emotional learning improves children and young people's future outcomes.

- There are equity gaps in social and emotional learning for children and young people experiencing disadvantage, which can be improved by effective social and emotional learning interventions.

The most effective approaches to social and emotional learning combine whole-of-school approaches with classroom strategies and targeted approaches (Clarke & Waddell, 2018; Goldberg et al., 2019) to support social and emotional learning for students and educators and to provide a pedagogical framework to shape learning environments. In a comprehensive review, the Telethon Kids Institute also identified a range of core principles required to support social and emotional learning:

- Meaningful engagement between schools, families and support services.

- Shared community responsibility for ensuring a positive school culture and action.

- Student behaviour is integrated within a strategic whole-school approach and processed to learning, wellbeing mental health intervention and support.

- Evidence-informed programs, practices and processes used to plan implement, monitor and evaluate school change and improvement.

- Proactive prevention focused, relationship-based and restorative practices are balanced with appropriate discipline practices.

- A student-centred strengths-based approach is adopted to ensure developmentally appropriate and relevant content for students.

- School leaders, teachers and specialist staff are supported through capacity building and wellbeing practices.

- Social and emotional skills and behaviour expectations are explicitly taught to students.

- Opportunities for developmental skill building and authentic praise.

- Quality implementation of effective interventions including a staged approach with meaningful planning, capacity building, sufficient time and resources.

- School contextual, cultural strengths and needs are considered.

- Continuous assessment and monitoring through collective data systems that support evidence-based decision-making processes (Pearce et al., 2019).

3 Support for school attendance

Education is one of the most important levers for improving child outcomes and addressing inequity. However, students need to attend school and be ready to learn to benefit from what schools have to offer (Hancock et al., 2013) which makes attendance crucial.

The existing literature shows that:

- Attendance is an important contributor to student achievement.

- When not addressed, attendance gaps will accumulate over time and widen the achievement gap between high- and low-achieving students.

- Children from cohorts experiencing disadvantage are more likely to miss school and are also more impacted by non-attendance than students with more advantage.

- School attendance is also important for other developmental and social outcomes.

Barriers to student attendance are multifaceted, while some relate to the school environment and are potentially easier or more visible to address, others relate to individual and family factors.

As the reasons for student absence are multi-faceted, any approach to improving attendance will require multiple approaches to be successful (Hancock et al., 2013). Successful strategies include a combination of early intervention, parental engagement, collaboration, and shared responsibility with the community including students, parents, schools and the wider community and targeted approaches that consider students individual needs and context (Hancock et al., 2013; Education Endowment Foundation, 2022). These approaches include:

- Parent communication interventions.

- Targeted parental engagement interventions.

- Early intervention.

- Holistic school-wide approaches.

- Intensive individual interventions.

School attendance is crucial so that children and young people can access education and develop the necessary knowledge and skills to participate in society.

4 Parent engagement in learning

Parent engagement in learning encompasses a broad range of activities, including parent support for children's learning at home, at school and in community contexts, while recognising the cultural and social diversity of families and communities. While some studies use the terms interchangeably, there is significant research evidence distinguishing between 'parent engagement' and 'parent involvement':

- Parent engagement includes activities at home or at school that support a child's learning such as reading, maths, doing homework and collaborating with teachers on how children are learning, developing, and achieving, which might involve parent teacher interviews or school class parent meetings.

- Parent involvement may include attending events, volunteering in class or other activities such as excursions, or serving on school councils and parent committees.

Parent engagement in learning has been shown to have a greater impact on student academic outcomes compared to parent involvement activities (O'Hehir & Savelsberg, 2014; Emerson et al., 2012). However, both play an important role in child and community outcomes, extending beyond academic outcomes, particularly in diverse communities experiencing disadvantage with challenges for social inclusion and cohesion, and where parents may need more support for social and economic participation. Parent engagement in learning:

- Influences academic achievement and supports cognitive, behaviour, social and emotional development.

- Is important to strengthen belief in the importance of education and increase aspirations for children.

- Is important to increase the quality of at home learning.

- Builds strong school-family partnerships.

A review of parent engagement by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth and the ACT Government established a distinction between home-based and school-based engagement identifying family-led learning and family-school partnerships as two core domains.

- Family-led learning focused on high aspirations for children, shared reading, a positive environment for homework, parent-child conversation, a cognitively stimulating home environment and support for social and emotional wellbeing (ARACY, 2016).

- Family-school partnerships that encourage positive-parent-teacher relationships, communication about children's progress, and engagement in the school community, while equipping parents to effectively encourage and support their children's learning and wellbeing (Fox & Olsen, 2014).

Parent engagement is incredibly important not only to student learning to improve academic achievement, but to improve outcomes across all areas of life throughout all ages and stages of schooling. And, while home-based parental engagement is linked with the strongest outcomes, home-school based partnerships are crucial for community trust, cohesion and coordinated support for students.

There are a number of school-based drivers that impact parental engagement, including: the quality of relationships between parents and teachers/school leaders, school capacity to engage parents, school organisational structure, and staff engagement skills.

5 School leadership

School leadership refers to the practice of setting school philosophy and culture, establishing the vision, expectations and organisational conditions to improve teaching expertise and quality, foster a professional learning culture and ultimately improve learning outcomes.

Many studies have highlighted the positive role of school leadership in student achievement (Li & Liu, 2022; Wu & Shen, 2022; Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson & Gray, 2019; Sebastian et al., 2017; Di Liberto et al., 2015; Dhuey & Smith, 2014). A recent meta-analysis of 12 existing meta-analyses found that principal leadership has a statistically significant, positive relationship with student achievement, and that over time, new research has increased the precision and consistency of the estimated effect of principal leadership on student achievement (Wu & Shen, 2022).

While the effect of school leadership on student achievement may be moderate in size, its positive influence on a range of factors including teacher quality, leadership, efficacy and collaboration, and a school's ability to sustain improvement over time 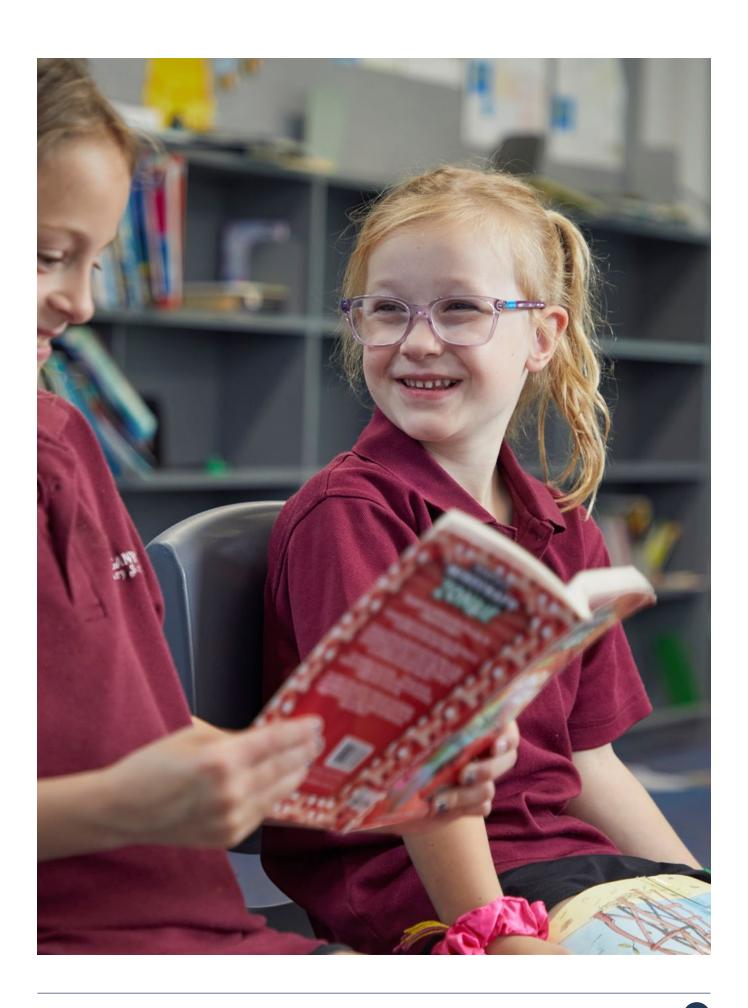make it a key foundation for high-quality schooling. While the effect of good leadership in the context of disadvantage and low socioeconomics is complex, there is some evidence that principals can play a pivotal role.

There has been a significant amount of research on the barriers and challenges school leaders face. Tintoré et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis of over 153 papers from 17 years of research and found eight themes of leadership challenges. These include: the management challenge; the complexity challenge; the learning challenge; challenges with educational authorities and educational policy; challenges with teachers, teaching and non-teaching staff; challenges with students; challenges with families and the school community; and challenges with society.

In terms of what good looks like in school leadership, the literature discusses instructional and distributed leadership models extensively, there is general refrain from specifying a 'best' model, and an expectation that good leaders are sensitive and responsive to the context they operate in.

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