



Whatever it takes: getting kids back on track

Whatever it takes to help young people get back on track.



In this post, Cheryl Vardon, Chief Executive and Principal Commissioner of the Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) and Margaret Gurney, Assistant Director-General, State Schools Operations at the Department of Education, talk about what they are doing to help those children who need it most to get back on track. This is the third and final article in the 'Whatever it takes' series:

- *'The turnaround power of education', and*
- *'A shared commitment to supporting every child to succeed at school and in life'.*

Student disengagement has far-reaching, lifelong consequences, increasing the likelihood of unemployment, incarceration and poverty. This is why supporting vulnerable young people who have disengaged from their education is such vital work and requires sustained commitment from the many people and organisations responsible for supporting Queensland's children and young people.

As policy leaders and advocates for young people in Queensland, Cheryl and Margaret recognise the dedication, precision and effort it takes to support every student to succeed.

On both a personal and professional level, they have seen what can be achieved when young people are

<https://www.sparktheirfuture.qld.edu.au/back-on-track>

supported to engage at school; and they have also seen the many barriers that can lead a young person to disengage from their education and fail to fulfil their potential.

Collaborating for success

“I’ve been privileged to witness firsthand the remarkable results we can achieve when we all work together to support disengaged young people and help them get back on track,” reflects Margaret.

“We know how important school is as a protective factor for many children who might otherwise fall through the cracks. But schools cannot do it alone.

“At the Department of Education, we talk about supporting young people and getting them back on track as being everybody’s business.

“And when we say everybody, we mean our schools, government agencies, non-government agencies, parents, extended families and the community as a whole.

“Every day, we see the incredible work of educators and support staff at a local level in our schools.

“But there are also many government and non-government agencies that support this important work.

“We chair the Youth Engagement Alliance, comprised of senior representatives from many government departments, including the Department of Education, the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Queensland Health, the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women, and the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Partnerships.

“We formed the Alliance because we recognise that young people with complex needs need intervention and support from multiple agencies.

“And it’s only through multiple agencies working together that we can make sure every child and young person is equipped with the tools and support they need to succeed professionally and personally.

“If we partner in this way, we can help young people deal with the barriers that stop them fully engaging in their education and fulfilling their potential in life.”

Understanding the barriers

Cheryl agrees. “Recognising the barriers that children and young people face is critical to our understanding of what we need to do to help them get back on track.

“This year more than 8000 children and young people had their say in our ‘Growing up in Queensland’ survey and our early analysis indicates that some young people have significant barriers standing in their way.

“Of the survey participants still at school, approximately 70 per cent said they plan to finish school.

“Just over half of all survey participants said they want to go to university and many told us they want to undertake further training and education after they finish school.

“Yet, without support, there are numerous barriers that could stop these young people fulfilling their aspirations.

“In our survey, 58 per cent of young people said that financial difficulties represented a barrier to accessing further education and vocational training.

“Geographical barriers can also be a problem for young people, particularly those who live in rural and remote areas.

“Young people in regional, rural and remote locations tell us they want to access training and education using web-based tools, but also say that the speed, reliability and cost of appropriate internet access represents a significant barrier to their use of these resources.”

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Cheryl also acknowledges the cultural barriers felt by some students. “We know that young people can face cultural barriers, in particular those young people who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander,” explains Cheryl.

“Young people who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spoke of the importance of having teachers who reflect their cultural identity.

“We believe that a higher representation of such teachers could improve the educational experience of young people who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander by teaching in first languages, building their knowledge of culture and tradition, and providing them with role models through their educational years.”

“In hearing from Tahlia as part of our Families are First program about the importance of education and keeping language alive, she spoke of her schooling and how her mother influenced her to go to school every day and even pursue further learning which inspired Tahlia to become a teacher herself, helping educate kids with language.”

“You make a very important point,” agrees Margaret. “It’s clear that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have the best chance of success when they can connect with role models at school and experience a sense of belonging through seeing their identity, language and culture valued.

“The Department of Education has a number of initiatives designed to increase the representation of Indigenous people in our schools and workforce more broadly.

“We have developed the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Strategy 2019-2021* to create employment opportunities and career pathways for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and to increase their representation in teaching and senior management roles.

“And our Remote Area Teacher Education Program offers locally-based teacher education programs that allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to remain in their own communities while they study to become teachers.

“If we can increase the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our schools, this will go a long way to giving young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander exposure to role models they can identify with and who can help them to stay engaged in their education.”

Giving young people the right skills

In addition to the importance of role models, Cheryl says the Commission’s research also identified important life skills that young people need to be taught. “Our research found that young people need to be taught the skills that will help them handle the challenges they will face as they navigate the world of adulthood,” explains Cheryl.

“We know about the importance of cognitive, organisational, and analytic and technical skills, but young people also need foundational skills in emotional intelligence, relationship building, conflict management and balancing family, life and work.

“In our survey, young people particularly spoke about the importance of life skills such as how to vote, how to apply for a rental property, how to budget, and how to manage finances.

“These skills are essential to support young people in making transitions from their senior schooling to further education, training and employment.

“When young people lack these skills, it can contribute to additional legal and financial pressures which can lead them to disengage from their education, training and job-seeking.”

Equipping schools to support vulnerable young people

“As you say, Cheryl, building the skills of our young people is essential if we are to set them up for success in life,” says Margaret.

“At the same time, building the capability of our teachers and schools to give young people the support they need is also essential.

“We undertook research to better understand what we need to do to create environments that can help even the most disengaged young people to learn better.

“The findings from the research make it clear which practices contribute most to student engagement at school:

- creating a culture and vision that seeks to engage and retain every student
- setting high expectations for every student
- rejecting deficit explanations for student outcomes
- developing high-performing and expert teams that work together to support student engagement
- using behavioural, cognitive and wellbeing indicators to track and respond to student needs
- investing in resources that prioritise students engagement and outcomes
- creating quality learning environments in which students are engaged, challenged, and feel safe to take risks
- nurturing meaningful connections among students, teachers and families to encourage student engagement and achievement.

“We know that when you combine this kind of culture with high-quality teaching and learning, every student is valued as a learner with the potential to succeed.

“Every child needs access to a stimulating and challenging curriculum so they can build what we call their ‘learning stamina’.

“Schools that support every child to succeed don’t water down opportunities for their most disengaged students; instead, they look for ways to connect the curriculum to the lives and experiences of their students.

“Part of our job in the department is to support our schools to incorporate these practices into the way they work day to day.

“We know this support is essential if we are to help young people get back on track and make the most of their education.”

Using the power of collaboration

As policy leaders, both Cheryl and Margaret recognise the importance of collaboration among the many organisations tasked with supporting Queensland’s children and young people.

“Putting children at the forefront of how we respond means acknowledging just how many government and non-government organisations some children may encounter during their lives,” explains Margaret.

“In partnership with schools, multiple agencies must work together to provide the level of support that our most at-risk children and young people need to help them re-engage with their schooling. Young people shouldn’t have to tell their story multiple times, and when it comes to government, every door should be the right door to the help they need.”

Cheryl agrees. “It’s so important that organisations like the QFCC and the Department of Education – along with many other agencies – work together.

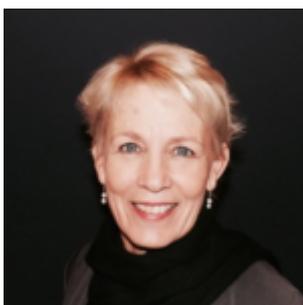
“We each have something to contribute in supporting children to overcome the challenges in their lives and experience the benefits that education can give them in later life.

“Such support needs to start in the early childhood education years and continue right through important transitions to primary school and high school.

“We know that missing out on educational opportunity sets a pattern of struggle throughout a young person’s life so we must commit to putting education at the front and centre of our policy responses so we can ensure every young Queenslander gets the most out of their education and can go on to lead a productive and fulfilling life.”

Find out more

Talking Families and Spark their Future are here to support you through the tough years of parenting.



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