

Dr Deb Hull

ABN NO. 48 293 969 631

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION & TRAINING

POST COMPULSORY DIVISION

OFFICE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

**Identifying students at risk of disengaging
from education and training**

Final Report

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Contractor: Dr Deb Hull
ABN NO. 48 293 969 631
'Karkalla', 60 Somerville Lane, Riddells Creek, Victoria 3431
Phone: 5428 7131 Email: karkalla@bigpond.net.au

1. PROJECT BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Purpose

The *Identifying Students at Risk of Disengaging from Education and Training* research project was commissioned by the Post Compulsory Division, Office of Learning and Teaching, Victorian Department of Education. The purpose of the project is to inform the Department's decision-making regarding appropriate tools or strategies to enable Government Secondary Schools to meet the MIPs accountability requirement of identifying students at risk of disengaging from education and training.

This project does not consider the implementation or evaluation of strategies for *supporting* young people identified as 'at risk'.

Scope

The project:

- Documents definitions of 'at risk' and advises on issues regarding a definition for Victorian secondary schools
- Researches, compares and contrasts some of the available tools.

The scope for the review is tools in use/developed for use in Victoria/Australia.

Project Manager

The project was managed by Leela Darvall and Jeremy Brewer, Post Compulsory Division, Department of Education & Training (Phone: 03 9637 2517).

Methodology

The information contained in this report was derived from a review of data and documentation provided by the Department of Education, internet research, responses from Regional Offices and Local Learning and Employment Networks, telephone interviews with stakeholders, and meetings with staff from the Post Compulsory Division.

This project represents a brief survey of current practice in Victoria, and it is possible that other effective approaches and strategies for identifying 'at risk' young people exist and should be given due consideration as they come to the attention of the Department of Education.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Definitions of ‘at risk’

The current Government retention-rate target of ‘90% of students to complete year 12 or equivalent’ implies that the Government would define students ‘at risk’ to be those who are unlikely to do so.¹ However, schools and other education bodies are currently defining it in a range of ways, drawing on their values and on the intervention strategies they have chosen to implement. Some are focused on retention to year 12, others believe that all destinations (apart from total disengagement) can be regarded as equally positive. The way in which a school defines ‘at risk’ leads the school to provide targeted support to students experiencing that particular kind of ‘risk’ – for example, disenchantment with schooling, early school leaving, disengagement from education and training, or disengagement from all post school pathways.

A narrower definition would lead to more focus on the risk factors that lead to *that particular outcome*, and the intervention strategies that ameliorate them. For that reason, defining ‘at risk’ is a significant policy decision, as what it means to support ‘young people at risk’ and how resources should be directed will evolve from that definition.

Most of the tools and strategies considered by this project are either based on the research into early school leaving, or explicitly aim to predict which young people are ‘at risk’ of not completing year 12.

Strategies and tools for identifying students ‘at risk’

There are a range of strategies and tools currently in use or being developed in Victoria. These include:

- reviewing absenteeism and academic achievement, coupled with a process to support and consolidate teacher referrals. Some schools also facilitate parent and student referrals, and have a formal process for reviewing school reports.
- a comprehensive survey that was developed from the research into the characteristics of early school leavers, is completed by the students, and then subject to a comprehensive statistical analysis to distinguish those ‘at risk’
- a tool that extracts relevant information from the CASES database and marries it with information from teachers, welfare coordinators, etc. to establish each student’s level of risk
- a range of checklists and spreadsheets that are completed by teachers and other staff to ensure that a range of risk factors are considered when a student’s level of risk is

¹ As discussed below, to provide guidance to schools and other providers, this definition would require an accompanying statement of what constitutes an ‘equivalent’, and of who is responsible for improving retention and completion in non-school settings.

determined, and

- a strategy that endorses the ability of teachers to accurately identify 'at risk' young people, and commits resources to restructuring schools so that each student has a single staff member who is responsible for maintaining communication and positive relationships with them, and monitoring their well-being and progress.

A summary comparison of the different tools and strategies is shown in the table below. Blue shading indicates that the approach is considered to meet, or to meet for the most part, the Department's criteria. Red shading indicates that, on balance, the approach does not meet the Department's criteria.

In addition to these tools and strategies, there are surveys regarding a student's intentions to complete or leave school, social/emotional well-being surveys, case management processes with checklists, and so on. These are not designed to act as comprehensive predictors of which students are at risk of early school leaving, but are useful support tools that might be used by schools for certain cohorts or at certain points in a student's progression through school.

Table 1: Overview of strategies discussed in this report, considered against criteria for suitability for widespread use in Victorian schools

| Criteria for comparison | Combinations of common strategies | La Trobe University Tool | Brimbank Melton LLEN strategy | Teacher-Student Connection strategy | Gippsland Checklist strategy |
|--|---|--|---|---|--|
| Validity of tool, supported by evidence base: | No evidence of evaluation undertaken. | Evidence-based trial has been conducted. Relationship between results of tool and actual school-leaving patterns has not been established. | Not trialled yet. | No evidence of evaluation undertaken. | No evidence of evaluation undertaken. |
| Favourable evaluation by MIPs Coordinators/teachers: | This approach has been established by school staff, and is heavily reliant on the perceptions of teachers | Tool results in significantly different cohort of 'at risk' young people than teacher predictions. | The combination of quantitative 'flags' and teacher input is likely to be appealing to school staff. | An extension of the current situation in most schools. This strategy places greater pastoral demands on some teachers. | An extension of the current situation in most schools. |
| Appropriate reading age: | Approach does not require any written student input | Tool has been designed and trialled to accommodate Year 9 reading age, though students with very poor literacy would require support. | The tool does not require any written input from students. | The strategy does not require any written input from students. | The strategy does not require any written input from students. |
| Ease of administration: | Depends on how many of the strategies the school includes in its approach. 'Referral only' approach requires little administration. | Future use of the tool requires teachers or other school staff to enter the data from hand-written questionnaires. | The tool is relatively easy to administer, and would become very easy to administer if the CASES template could be made available to schools. | The strategy might require significant structural and timetable change. | The strategy is easy, though time consuming, to administer. |
| Ease of analysis to determine risk: | Very simple analysis, using data the school already holds. | Tool requires a highly sophisticated statistical analysis. | Requires no particular expertise to complete and is easy to interpret. | There is no analysis required. | There is no analysis required. |

| Criteria for comparison | Combinations of common strategies | La Trobe University Tool | Brimbank Melton LLEN strategy | Teacher-Student Connection strategy | Gippsland Checklist strategy |
|--|---|---|--|--|--|
| Availability to Victorian Government Secondary Schools from 2006... | Yes | Future use would have to be negotiated, but is likely to be granted. | Yes. | Yes. | Yes. |
| Ability to meet Department approval requirements including privacy and research: | School holds all the data and it does not pass into external hands. | As the use of this tool would generate data for a research activity, Departmental approval would be required. The ongoing use and 'ownership' of the data would also have to be resolved. | The quantitative data is already entered by schools onto CASES. The information does not pass to external hands. Protocols regarding who can access completed spreadsheets and archiving would need to be established. | Yes | Yes, though access and archiving protocols would be advisable. |
| Low/no cost: | Yes | Free for the next three years, conditional upon the University having access to the data for research purposes. | Yes | Yes, though the redistribution of teaching loads to allow for pastoral duties has resourcing implications. | Yes |
| Applicability of tool to secondary schools: | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Applicability of tool to other education and training contexts: | Useful for primary school welfare and remedial programming strategies. Not suited to training providers. | Not suited to primary schools. Not suited to training providers. | Useful for primary schools. Not suited to training providers. | Useful for primary schools. Not suited to training providers. | Useful for primary schools. Not suited to training providers. |

Potential pitfalls

An approach which conclusively defines a student as 'at risk' or 'not at risk' has some potential pitfalls. Many young people are surprisingly resilient, despite experiencing a raft of disadvantages or personal setbacks, and effective identification processes must include a way of recognising such students, and be flexible enough to note that the social/emotional well-being of most adolescents will change over time. Also, a label that follows a young person may prevent them from making a fresh start once a risk factor is removed from their lives or as they move on to a new year, new teacher or new peer group. At worst, the label might inspire schools to 'nudge' such students down a pre-determined path for 'at risk' young people. Finally, focusing on 'risk factors' or what is 'wrong' about individual students may inhibit reflection on the potential for systemic or whole-school change that could increase engagement by all students.

Conclusions

At this stage in the development of tools and strategies, it would be premature to issue a mandated approach to identifying young people at risk. The more sophisticated tools have not yet been proven as effective predictors of early school leaving, and the simpler approaches have not been evaluated at all. Even if one strategy or tool was to prove its effectiveness in one context, this may not be suitable to all contexts.

However, schools are seeking guidance and would value the Department's assistance in sourcing a range of tools and strategies to support their work. This would reduce widespread 'reinventing the wheel', and would enable schools to choose strategies that were aligned with their school's context, structure, culture and values.

All schools should be required to reflect on the effectiveness of the identification strategies they are using. School analysis of all early school leavers (including those that make a transition to another education and training provider) should consider:

- The average time before leaving that the student had been identified as 'at risk'
- The common characteristics of those early school leavers who are identified as 'at risk' early, and those who take the school by surprise when they leave.

This kind of reflection will inform an evolving discussion of the most effective strategy (or strategies) for identifying young people 'at risk'.

3. THE CONTEXT IN WHICH IDENTIFICATION/PREDICTION OCCURS

Definitions of 'at risk'

The words 'at risk' are used throughout the Victorian school system, but their meaning is debated and disputed. It should be noted that in many contexts (including some policy documents and descriptions of many programs designed to assist young people who are 'at risk'), the term 'at risk' is used on its own with no subsequent words to qualify its meaning.²

Discussion of 'risk' often confuses the distinction between the questions 'at risk of what?' and 'who is at risk?'. How can you identify who to include in the category of 'young people at risk' until you declare the nature of the undesirable outcome they face? Some of the possible definitions offered by Australian and international researchers include 'at risk of disengagement from school', 'at risk of becoming [educationally] disadvantaged because of conditions surrounding their births or home environments', 'at risk of becoming delinquent'³, 'at risk of leaving school before completing Year 12', 'at risk of not attaining their educational potential and preparing effectively for post school destinations', and '[those students whose] actions at school create feelings of frustration, anger, unhappiness, fear and guilt in their teachers, their peers, their parents or themselves...'⁴.

The South Australian Students At Risk program in 2000 used 'at risk of leaving school early without any clear direction'. The Western Australian Department of Education defined 'at risk' as 'those students not achieving their major learning outcomes, and thus their full potential'. The Queensland Department of Education defines 'Students at educational risk' as 'those students whose experience of schooling, together with other factors in their lives, makes them vulnerable to not completing twelve years of schooling or equivalent qualification, or not achieving to their potential, the essential knowledge and skills for effective participation in work, relationships and families, and as active citizens in the community'.⁵

The Real Learning Real Futures initiative in Tasmania defined it as 'at risk of not continuing with their education beyond Year 10'.⁶ Kirby referred to 'risk' as an 'inability to participate' in a globalised world through a lack of skills. The Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce identified risk as 'severe

² This creates an ambiguity of meaning, but it is also an inappropriate abbreviation as not all parents are familiar with education jargon and can be frightened when they hear the school has identified that their child is 'at risk'. This is particularly confusing as other government agencies use 'at risk' to describe the risks of youth offending, long-term unemployment, suicide, abuse or physical harm, and developing mental health problems.

³ Respectively, Murdock 1999, Duke & Griesdorn 1999. All cited in *Best Practices for At Risk Children*, Ana McDonald, 2002.

⁴ Respectively, *A Case Study of Identification and Intervention Strategies*, Graham Bradley, Division of Education and The Arts, Gold Coast University College of Griffith University, 1991; STAR (Students At Risk) Policy, Traralgon Secondary College, 1998; *Education & Youth At Risk*, Sara Thorley-Smith, Community Care Program, NSW Department of School Education.

⁵ On The Margins: Making a Difference website, South Australian Department of Education; About Students at Educational Risk, Western Australian Department of Education website; Queensland Department of Education Manual (online).

⁶ *Real Learning Real Futures, A Derwent District Partnership. A Brief Evaluation and Reflection*, Roger Holdsworth, Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum and the Tasmanian Department of Education.

disconnection from family and community links and from school'.⁷ The Jobs Pathways Program has recently redefined risk as 'at risk of not making a successful transition *through school* and from school to further education, training, employment and active participation in the community' [my italics].⁸

In Victorian schools, the term appears to be defined (implicitly or explicitly) to accommodate the culture of the school and the intervention strategies they choose to implement, rather than the other way around.

Some schools conceptualise 'at risk' as the new term to describe what used to be called 'disadvantage' – the range of demographic and economic barriers that cause *whole groups* of individuals to be 'at risk of failing to participate fully or succeed in education'. Such barriers include poverty, homelessness, disability, and ethnicity.⁹ Systemic barriers of this nature require systemic approaches to ameliorate them. The schools that define 'at risk' in this way, and that serve a significantly 'disadvantaged' student population, can logically arrive at a belief that all of their students are 'at risk', and that whole-school programming and structural change is required to address the problem.¹⁰ As funding ideologies shift from notions of addressing 'disadvantage' to supporting those 'at risk', it might be expected that schools grappling with widespread disadvantage will cling to this definition.

At the other extreme, students are sometimes identified as 'at risk' only when they announce (spontaneously or via a survey mechanism) their intention of leaving school prior to the completion of year 12. This implies that such schools are defining risk as 'at risk of early school leaving'. However, the fact that risk is identified at such a late stage (once the intention to leave school has been formed) leaves the school with little option but to focus on transition support (as opposed to remedial or alternative programs to encourage retention). A school that relies heavily or solely on transition support as a response to 'risk' is, practically, defining risk as 'at risk of disengagement from education, *training or employment*'. In other words, the 'risk' is successfully addressed if the student makes a transition to some other form of education, training or employment.

This is central to a widespread debate in Victorian education about whether the aim of the school should be to retain the student to the end of year 12 or to facilitate a range of possible 'pathways' in

⁷ Ministerial Review of Post-Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria, (also known as The Kirby Review), 2000. *Footprints to the Future*, Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce Report, 2001. Both cited in *Concepts of Risk within Policy Documents*, discussion paper, Young People & Learning Networks Project, An ARC Linkage partnership between Deakin University & Smarter Geelong Region LLEN.

⁸ Information Paper. *Enhancements to Jobs Pathways Program 2006-2008, A Step in the Right Direction*, 2005.

⁹ The linguistic shift in policy development is discussed in *The Logic of Equity Practice in Education Queensland 2010*, Sandra Taylor and Parlo Sing, School of Cultural and Language Studies, QUT. This article looks at the history of 'disadvantage' terminology which is associated with the redistribution of resources, and 'individuals at risk' terminology that is associated with recognition of difference. "While the shift in language to view difference as an asset is apparently positive, it ignores the existence of both material disadvantage and cultural oppression, and could be said to be 'equity blind'."

¹⁰ This definition is problematic in that it makes no allowance for 'resilience', or the fact that even the most disadvantaged communities produce young people who are academically capable, organised, personally ambitious and socially skilled. There are undoubtedly fewer of them in such communities, but they exist.

the post compulsory years. This debate is occurring between and within individual schools. Attempts to define 'at risk' are inextricably caught up in this debate. Those who believe any kind of 'engagement' is of equal value are likely to emphasise transitions over retention, and will thus prefer 'at risk of disengagement from education, training or employment' as their definition. There is some encouragement for this view in the Government's target of '90% retention to year 12 or equivalent by 2010'.¹¹ This definition tends to lead into a complex, and sometimes passionate, debate about what qualifies as a desirable training or employment outcome.

On the other hand, there is a body of research in Australia that suggests that, regardless of alternative pathways, the outcomes for those who leave school prior to Year 12 are significantly poorer than for those who stay.¹² Schools and communities that accept this finding and therefore believe that their role is to keep young people engaged *in schooling* will address 'risk' by introducing remedial and alternative programs and welfare/pastoral support, and are likely to prefer 'at risk of not completing year 12' as their definition.

There is a further semantic question about the use of the term 'disengagement' in a definition of 'at risk'. Does disengagement refer to formally leaving school and 'dropping out' of training or employment? Or does disengagement also refer to those young people who remain enrolled in education and training, or who show up for work, but who are not socially or intellectually engaged in their school, provider or work communities?¹³ Is 'at risk' funding to be used to address this phenomenon of 'disenchantment'?

Schools are currently defining 'risk' in various ways, consistent with the values of the school or influential teachers within the school. Many Local Learning and Employment Networks began with community conversations about what 'at risk' meant and whether it was possible to reach a local consensus on which 'at risk' young people most urgently needed support. The looseness and interpretability of the term 'at risk' has enabled schools to address 'risk' in a range of ways – whole school approaches, transition support, targeted remedial or alternative programming, or a combination of these.

The current Government retention-rate target of '90% of students to complete year 12 or equivalent'

¹¹ The current limitations of this approach are the lack of a clear definition of 'or equivalent', and no requirement or capacity for schools to monitor whether the students who have taken different post compulsory pathways achieve the 'equivalent' of year 12 – in other words, whether the transition has led to an 'equivalent' successful outcome. The obligations of the training sector to contribute to and report against achieving the Government's targets are unclear.

¹² *How Young People Are Faring, Key Indicators 2004*, Mike Long, Dusseldorp Skills Forum. *Non-completion of school in Australia: The changing patterns of participation and outcomes. Longitudinal Study*, Stephen Lamb, Peter Dwyer and Johanna Wyn, LSAY Research Report Number 16, 2000.

¹³ This has been defined as 'those who do not benefit from school while still attending'. South Australian Education Department 1993, cited in *Students At Risk*, Margaret Batten and Jean Russell.

¹⁴ As discussed below, to provide guidance to schools and other providers, this definition would require an accompanying statement of what constitutes an 'equivalent', and of who is responsible for improving retention and completion in non-school settings.

implies that the Government would define students 'at risk' to be those who are unlikely to do so.¹⁴ The way in which a school defines 'at risk' leads the school to provide targeted support to students experiencing that particular kind of 'risk' – for example, disenchantment with schooling, early school leaving, disengagement from education and training, or disengagement from all post school pathways.

A narrower definition would lead to more focus on the risk factors that lead to *that particular outcome*, and the intervention strategies that ameliorate them. For that reason, defining 'at risk' is a significant policy decision, as what it means to support 'young people at risk' and how resources should be directed will evolve from that definition.

Risk Factors

Using a range of definitions of 'at risk', researchers have considered the common characteristics of young people who are 'at risk' or who prove they were 'at risk' by leaving school early. Some of these recognise continuing, long-recognised barriers to educational success including poverty and lack of literacy in English. Others highlight the impact of academic failure. As these researchers are examining different cohorts of students, and looking for different things, none provide Victorian schools with a sliding scale of all risk factors in order of their influence on outcomes for young people. Nor is it always clear which of these are risk factors that *cause* present or imminent disengagement, and which are simply the indicators or outward signs by which it might be recognised.

Some of the risk factors and indicators which have been linked¹⁵ to early school leavers and disengaged young people include:

¹⁵ Identified in: *Students At Risk Research and Mapping Exercise*, Peter Roberts and Associates, 2003; *School Leavers in Australia: Profiles and Pathways*, Julie McMillan and Gary N. Markes, LSAY Research Report Number 31, 2003; *Engaging Programs: How are Australian schools responding to low student retention?*, David Zyngier & Trevor Gale, Paper presented to Australian Association of Research in Education, 2003; *Neighbourhood Effects and Community Spillovers in the Australian Youth Labour Market*, Dan Andrews, Colin Green and John Mangan, LSAY Research Report Number 24, 2002; *Student Workers in High School and Beyond...*, Margaret Vickers, Stephen Lamb, John Hinkley, LSAY Research Report Number 30, 2003; *Mentoring At Risk Students, A School Based Action Research Project*, Robert King, Department of Education Victoria, 1999; *About Students at Educational Risk*, Western Australian Department of Education website; *Submission to Standing Committee on Education*, Community Services and Recreation, ACT Young Carers Network, 2000.

School-based factors:

- Unsupportive school culture
- Repressive discipline
- Large class sizes
- Unstimulating content
- Competitive exam-dominated assessment
- Negative student-teacher relationships
- Negative peer relationships in school community
- Absence of school counsellors
- Lack of student participation in decision-making
- Poor school/home relationships
- Poor teaching quality
- Lack of clear relationships with the wider community leading to an absence of support and referrals

School-based factors and indicators for the individual student

- Truancy
- Behavioural issues
- Low literacy level
- Low numeracy level
- Significant change in demeanour, behaviour or performance
- Attitude to schooling
- Does not value school completion
- Articulated intention of early school leaving
- Negative peer influence
- Aggression/violence

Community and family

- Poverty
- Low income household
- Parental unemployment
- Australian-born parents, English-speaking background
- Aboriginal or Islander
- Refugee
- Fragmented/reconstituted family structures
- Separation from family
- Low parental education attainment
- Poor family management practices
- Poor parent-child relationships
- Abuse
- High crime neighbourhood
- Incarcerated parent
- Frequent change of location/school
- High number of people in neighbourhood with vocational qualifications

Personal

- Poor health
- Low birth weight
- Ill health or disability
- Disruptive behaviours
- Passivity
- Low self esteem
- Low motivation
- Self-harming
- High level of aggression/violence
- Pregnancy/motherhood
- Offending
- Substance misuse
- Association with anti-social peers/adults
- Sex work
- Social isolation
- Male
- Non-metropolitan
- Working more than 5 hours of paid employment per week, especially for males
- Primary carer for parent or guardian with illness or mental illness

It is not possible for schools to resource and implement strategies that assess every student against every one of these factors and indicators. The focus of schools on those factors/indicators that are present in *most* early school leavers, leaving the rest to teacher judgement, is a logical use of available resources.

Attention to protective factors should also be considered alongside risk factors, so that schools and families can focus their efforts on those interventions and supports that have been shown to make a difference.

Potential pitfalls of identifying young people as 'at risk'

Schools and other parties involved in school education in Victoria have indicated that they would welcome greater guidance in defining and identifying young people 'at risk'. However, there are dangers in using a single tool or approach.

- Some young people have the resilience to overcome a raft of demographic, financial or personal barriers. To identify them as 'at risk' on the basis of a quantitative or 'tick a box' approach is inappropriate. At worst it could encourage such students to self-identify as 'precariously engaged', or trigger a school response that 'nudges' them down a pre-determined path for 'at risk' students. Processes that allow for teacher and parent input into assessing risk are more likely to recognise resilient students.¹⁶
- Any identification of a student as 'at risk' should be regarded as a snapshot in time and not a label or a determinant of the future. Some risk factors come and go in a student's life, and some students benefit from the opportunity to make a 'fresh start' with a new teacher, a new subject, or a new year.¹⁷ Expecting and facilitating future resilience and success should always be the

¹⁶ Resilience is described as 'the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances' (Best and Garmezy 1990). The Australian research into 'resilience' suggests that rather than the deficit model of defining 'risk', schools would be better served by identifying the protective factors that develop resilience and fostering these in all students. *Young Adolescents Displaying Resilient and Non-Resilient Behaviour: Insights from a Qualitative Study – Can Schools Make a Difference?*, Sue Howard and Bruce Johnson, University of South Australia.

¹⁷ Interview with Michelle Wakeford, Brotherhood of St Laurence.

¹⁸ This is also the focus of the Victorian project *Key Makers: Advancing Student Engagement through Changed Teaching Practice*, Final Report November 2004, David Zyngier of Monash University, for Monterey Secondary College and Frankston/Mornington Peninsula LLEN. 'For many marginalized students schools are not seen as the sites of engagement, but of disenfranchisement and alienation. This means that our public education system is failing these students, failing to provide them with the necessary equitable environment required for the delivery of social justice.... We will be told the problem lies with disaffected youth, negligent parents, the (overworked, underpaid) teachers, the school environment, et cetera. We could equally look for causes in the many systemic barriers to the educational and employment achievements of marginalized young people.'

¹⁹ 'This [identifying individuals at risk] approach, based on a deficit model of students, leads educators and policy makers to devise programs to identify the various ways in which children need to be changed in order to fit into existing schools structures and programs (Goodlad and Keating, 1990). Even more problematic, this early categorising of students often has the effect of lowering teachers' expectations of what students have the potential to achieve and often places students in the position of being blamed for poor school performance on the basis of characteristics over which they have no control.' *Teachers' Thinking about Childhood Resiliency: Preliminary Impressions from a Qualitative Study*, Bruce Johnson, Sue Howard and John Dryden (Faculty of Education, University of South Australia) and Kaye Johnson (Principal, Riverdale R-7 School), 1997.

school's starting point.

- Some of the current discussion about 'risk' is focused on whether the causes of disengagement and 'risk' are to be found primarily in the students (here are the things that are 'wrong' or 'lacking' in some students, leading to disengagement) or in the schools (here are the flaws in programming, structures, support services or teaching quality that lead to increased student disengagement).¹⁸ The quality of schooling, the expectations of teachers and peers, and good teacher-student relationships have been identified as significant protective factors. The focus on identifying which individual students are 'at risk' should not replace reflection on how schools should operate to engage the greatest possible number (not simply the majority) of students.¹⁹

4. Current strategies for identifying young people at risk

This section of the report considers the strategies Victorian schools are using to identify young people at risk. Many schools use strategies that aim to identify the presence of the most significant risk factors – absenteeism, poor academic performance and behavioural issues. This approach is discussed first, followed by an exploration of some specific tools strategies that are being trialled or implemented in Victorian schools, and that aim to identify young people at risk through a greater range of risk factors.

At the end of each discussion is a table that considers the method of identifying ‘at risk’ young people against the criteria provided in the project brief to determine its suitability for broader adoption in Victorian schools.

Common practice in Victoria – strategies that identify major risk factors

The most common strategies identified by this project that are currently used in Victoria are:

- Referral from teachers
- Referrals from parents
- Self referrals from students
- Review of literacy and numeracy levels
- Review of school reports and assessment outcomes
- Review of attendance patterns²⁰

Many schools use one or more of these ‘risk factors’ as a trigger for closer monitoring of a student’s progress. The MIPs coordinator or welfare coordinator, in partnership with Year Level coordinators, collates referrals and undertakes data analysis to identify those students who are deemed ‘at risk’.

This approach acknowledges research that indicates absenteeism/truancy and low levels of academic achievement are the most significant common characteristics of early school leavers. If you are only going to use a small range of data, this is the data that will catch the majority of the ‘at risk’ cohort. This approach also assumes that *someone* notices when a student is struggling or dissatisfied with school, and that clear processes to channel that ‘noticing’ into the school’s formal consideration of ‘risk’ are likely to catch many of the young people who are experiencing personal difficulties or behavioural problems.

While many secondary schools have implemented identification approaches based on one or more

²⁰ Interview with Ian Wallis, VASSP. VASSP submission to the Review of the Managed Individual Pathways Program. Interview with Peter Kellock, of the Asquith Group, regarding responses to the discussion paper distributed as part of the Review of the Managed Individual Pathways Program, (currently underway).

of the strategies above, and feel that they are having some success with these approaches, it has been suggested that additional guidance from the Department of Education & Training would be welcome.²¹

Table 2: Considering common practice against criteria for suitability for widespread use in Victoria.

| Criteria for comparison | Common practice – strategies that identify major risk factors |
|---|---|
| Validity of tool, supported by evidence base: | not available (see below) |
| Favourable evaluation by MIPs Coordinators/teachers: | this approach has been established by these groups, and is heavily reliant on the perceptions of teachers |
| Appropriate reading age: | this approach does not require any written student input |
| Ease of administration: | depends on how many of the approaches the school includes in its approach. 'Referral only' approach requires little administration. |
| Ease of analysis to determine risk: | very simple analysis, using data the school already holds. |
| Availability to Victorian Government Secondary Schools from 2006 with potential to be extended to Catholic and Independent schools: | Yes |
| Ability to meet Department approval requirements including privacy and research: | School holds all the data and it does not pass into external hands. |
| Low/no cost: | Yes |
| Applicability of tool to secondary schools: | Yes |
| Applicability of tool to other education and training contexts: | Useful for primary school welfare and remedial programming strategies. Training providers are unlikely to collect this data, or to have the relationships with parents to support reliance on a referral approach. |

²¹ Interview with Ian Wallis, VASSP. Interview with Michelle Wakeford, Brotherhood of St Laurence.

‘Aspects of Life’ Questionnaire –

La Trobe University Tool

La Trobe University, working with the City of Darebin and five secondary schools from that region, has developed and trialled a tool to identify students who are at risk of leaving school before completing Year 12.

The tool is a 48 item questionnaire (37 questions that seek information on risk factors, another 11 that seek information on parent education level, ethnicity or aboriginality, perceptions of academic achievement, attitudes to school subject choice, and intentions regarding school leaving or completion).

The items in the questionnaire grew from a review of research into the characteristics of early school leavers. The developers have included questions that elicit information on the student’s exposure to a range of risk factors, grouped into five ‘factors’ for analysis.

- *‘Academic’ – schoolwork, concentration, reading and writing skills, and overall success as a student.*
- *‘Home life’ – home life and parental support.*
- *‘Rebel’ – getting into trouble, wagging class, and association with friends who drink, smoke, and don’t care about school.*
- *‘School commitment and satisfaction’ – school belonging, satisfaction with school, and commitment to completing an education.*
- *‘Loner’ – problems with coping and feelings of loneliness, insecurity, and isolation.²²*

The tool was initially administered to a small pilot group, and the language of the questions was amended to assist the cohort (Year 9) to complete it without difficulty. The tool was then administered to 356 students from 5 secondary schools, plus another 14 young people who had left school early.

Student responses to the questionnaire were added together to form scores for each ‘factor’. These scores were then standardised to a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. Analysis of the tool identified as ‘at risk’ those young people who ranked in the bottom 15% in two or more of the ‘factors’.²³

Teachers were also asked to identify the students in the Year 9 cohort who were ‘at risk’. The tool identified 82 students as ‘at risk’. The teachers identified 73 students. Only 27 of the students were identified by both the tool and the teachers. The tool identified an even numbers of girls and boys. The teachers identified more boys (69% of the ‘at risk’ cohort) than girls.

²² *Identification of Students Who are At Risk of Dropping Out of School*, Final Report, Toby Cumming in consultation with Lyn Littlefield and Martin Jackson, School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University, 2000.

²³ This criteria is developed because achieving above the top 15% in at least four ‘factors’ is considered likely to provide a basis for resilience, and because using this criteria identifies approximately 23% of the cohort as ‘at risk’ and this is consistent with rates of school leaving. *Identification of Students Who Are At Risk of Dropping Out of School*, p. 18.

The accuracy of the tool as a predictor of early school leaving was assessed in two ways.

- (1) The scores of the 14 early school leavers were compared to the scores of the students who completed the questionnaire. The responses of the early school leavers were found to be similar to those of the group identified as 'at risk', and dissimilar to the group identified as 'not at risk'.
- (2) The responses to the survey were compared to the stated intentions of students regarding completion of Year 12 or early school leaving. 36% of those identified by the tool as 'at risk' stated an intention to leave school without completing Year 12, while 10% of those identified as 'not at risk' stated an intention to leave school without completing Year 12. 'For the tool-identified 'at risk' students, 48% predicted going on to further study, and 44% saw themselves going on to university.... Of the teacher-identified 'at risk' students, 40% predicted further study with only 28% predicting a future at university.'

A follow-up analysis of which members of the cohort actually left school prior to completing Year 12 (which they were due to do at the end of 2003), and whether the tool or the teachers' perceptions proved a more accurate predictor, was flagged but has not been completed. This would answer important questions such as 'Who left?' and 'Whose list were they on, if any?' The results of this analysis would have to be considered in the context of the influence of intervention strategies and teacher expectations. Nonetheless, this follow-up analysis is required to test the accuracy of a tool that aims to predict early school leaving.

This tool is thorough, grounded in research, and fine-tuned to suit its target cohort. It has the potential to enable schools to drill down into the common characteristics of young people who leave school before year 12, and to identify which characteristics are most likely to provide resilience. It is designed to predict which young people are at risk of early school leaving, but not which young people are at risk of disengagement from education *and training*. It would represent a significant addition to the administrative burden of schools, and is as yet unproven in its ability to predict early school leaving.

Table 3: Considering La Trobe University tool against criteria for suitability for widespread use in Victoria.

| Criteria for comparison | La Trobe University Tool |
|---|--|
| Validity of tool, supported by evidence base: | Evidence-based trial has been conducted. Relationship between results of tool and actual school-leaving patterns has not been established. |
| Favourable evaluation by MIPs Coordinators/teachers: | Tool results in significantly different cohort of 'at risk' young people than teacher predictions. This might be expected to cause some tension until the relationship between the results of the tool and actual school-leaving patterns has been established. |
| Appropriate reading age: | Tool has been designed and trialled to accommodate Year 9 reading age, though students with very poor literacy would require support and this may have privacy implications. |
| Ease of administration: | Future use of the tool requires teachers or other school staff to enter the data from hand-written questionnaires – the reason for this is unclear as online surveying is highly accessible to this cohort. |
| Ease of analysis to determine risk: | The tool currently requires a highly sophisticated statistical analysis be undertaken for the cohort as a whole, and then for each student. This has been undertaken by La Trobe University staff to date. A software package is proposed, but this is not yet available and its ease of use and cost have not yet been identified. |
| Availability to Victorian Government Secondary Schools from 2006 with potential to be extended to Catholic and Independent schools: | The tool is jointly owned by DE&T and La Trobe University. Future use would have to be negotiated. The University is likely to agree to widespread availability as part of an ongoing research activity. |
| Ability to meet Department approval requirements including privacy and research: | The initial research project received approval, and so presumably privacy and research concerns were met. However, as the use of this tool would generate data for a research activity, Departmental approval would be required. The ongoing use and 'ownership' of the data would also have to be resolved. |
| Low/no cost: | La Trobe University has offered the tool for no cost for the next three years, conditional upon the University having access to the data for research purposes. The long-term cost would need to be specified and negotiated before the tool is offered to schools, so they can make an informed choice about starting down this path. |
| Applicability of tool to secondary schools: | Yes |
| Applicability of tool to other education and training contexts: | The completion of the tool by students prior to Year 9 would be limited by literacy levels. The tool was developed out of research into the characteristics of early school leavers. Significant research and redevelopment would be required for a tool to identify, for example, the likelihood that a student would not complete a training program. |

Brimbank Melton LLEN strategy

The Brimbank Melton LLEN, with some of its member schools, is currently developing a strategy for identifying young people at risk of leaving school prior to completing year 12. The members of the LLEN have identified this group as their focus for priority attention and support, and accurately identifying these students is essential to monitoring the success of alternative and support programs.

The strategy developed from the longitudinal study by the Australian Council of Education Research (ACER) into the characteristics of early school leavers. From this research, the following profile of a likely school leaver was developed.

Demographic

- male
- low socio economic status
- parent(s) are early school leavers
- Koori
- From English speaking household
- From non-metropolitan area

Schooling

- Government school
- Low levels of literacy and numeracy
- High absenteeism
- Poor relationships with teachers
- Poor relationships with peers
- Low self-esteem, depression

The overall strategy is heavily influenced by the LLEN's belief that schools will only adopt an approach that minimises the burden on staff and particularly classroom teachers, and minimises duplication of data collection. Doug Smith, the tool's designer and an ex-Principal, argues that for a tool to be adopted by schools it must do both of these things.

The first element of the strategy is a 'tool' that is essentially a spreadsheet. Guided by the risk factors identified above, the first columns of the spreadsheet draw on information already collected in the CASES database. The information in each column is:

1. Attendance:
 - No. of unapproved absences
 - Attendance rate
2. Literacy
 - CSF Reading level
 - CSF Writing level
3. Numeracy
 - CSF Chance & data level
 - CSF Measurement level
4. Suspensions
 - No. of times
 - No. of days
5. Parents
 - Occupational code

It is envisaged that, for the trial, this information could be collated by administrative staff from the CASES database. In the longer term, it is proposed that the tool would be made available as a CASES template and the information would drop in automatically upon entering the student's CASES ID number.

The rest of the strategy relies on teacher knowledge of the student, parent referral and self-referral by the student. This is therefore subject to the quality of teacher-student relationships, parental involvement in their child's schooling, etc.

The sixth section (column) of the spreadsheet is a checklist of known risk factors. The MIPs coordinator, welfare coordinator, and year level or home room coordinator would complete this section for all students. Particular attention might be given to, and perhaps additional enquiries made regarding, those flagged by the quantitative process. The checklist includes: koorie, refugee, disability, sexual orientation, juvenile justice, mental health, homelessness, peer influence. It might be useful to add 'gifted and talented' to this list, to reflect research that shows many of these students do not complete Year 12.

The seventh section (column) of the spreadsheet is an opportunity for the school to allocate each student a rating to show the extremity or urgency of the risk. This process allows the school to acknowledge the resilience of some young people, and the vulnerability of others who do not appear to match the 'at risk' profile.

This strategy, implemented at least annually, would allow the school to document the risk factors associated with each student, monitor how they change over time, and undertake analyses of which risk factors prove hardest to overcome.

Beyond the potential identification of young people at risk, this approach offers additional advantages. The eighth section of the spreadsheet records the intervention strategies, alternative programs or specialist support services brought in to assist each 'at risk' student to remain at school. School management teams can scan the spreadsheet for each student to assess whether the support offered is appropriate to the risk factors (e.g. why offer careers counseling as the first response to someone with low literacy?).

This accurate documentation allows the school to review the effectiveness of the support it is offering to at risk students. A thorough analysis by risk factors, risk rating, support offered and subsequent retention outcomes can tell the school in quantitative terms whether what they are doing is working, and which aspects of their approach are proving most effective.²⁴

This approach has not yet undergone an evidence-based validation, though that is proposed for the

²⁴ Korumburra Primary School has developed a very similar tool, except that all columns in the spreadsheet are completed by the teacher, but which does capture the action taken by the school with regard to each student.

near future. The tool design has been grounded in research about the characteristics of early school leavers. There is a certain elegance about the schools making use of the CASES data they are required to enter, and using data they already have rather than collecting it afresh from the students. The combination of quantitative 'flags', staff perceptions, parent referral and self-referral is appealing, and the strategy leaves the final decisions about who is 'at risk' in the hands of the school. Administering the tool does not involve an additional burden on classroom teachers²⁵, and offers a potentially useful structure to the meetings of welfare, MIPs, and year level coordinators that already occur as part of the MIPs process in most schools. However, this strategy relies heavily on how much teachers know about the home circumstances and peer relationships of all of their students.

²⁵ The Brimbank Melton strategy currently requires schools to manually cross reference data sets to each student however it would be possible for the Department to request an update to the CASES environment so that all schools could access relevant data sets by students in one operation. This would help reduce any additional burden to the workload of School Support Officers.

Table 4: Considering Brimbank Melton LLEN strategy against criteria for suitability for widespread use in Victoria.

| Criteria for comparison | Brimbank Melton LLEN strategy |
|---|--|
| Validity of tool, supported by evidence base: | Not trialled yet. |
| Favourable evaluation by MIPs Coordinators/teachers: | The combination of quantitative 'flags' and teacher input is likely to be appealing to school staff. |
| Appropriate reading age: | The tool does not require any written input from students. |
| Ease of administration: | The tool is relatively easy to administer, does not require the gathering of duplicate data, and would become very easy to administer if the CASES template could be made available to schools. |
| Ease of analysis to determine risk: | The spreadsheet requires no particular expertise to complete and is easy to interpret. Thorough analysis of the effectiveness of school intervention strategies may require some guidance. |
| Availability to Victorian Government Secondary Schools from 2006 with potential to be extended to Catholic and Independent schools: | Yes. |
| Ability to meet Department approval requirements including privacy and research: | The quantitative data is already entered by schools onto CASES. The information does not pass to external hands. Protocols regarding who can access completed spreadsheets and archiving would need to be established. |
| Low/no cost: | Yes |
| Applicability of tool to secondary schools: | Yes |
| Applicability of tool to other education and training contexts: | The use of the tool by training providers would be limited as their data collection systems may not contain similar data fields, e.g. literacy standards. |

Teacher-student connection strategy

Some schools have taken the approach that *someone* always knows when a student is at risk, and that if the appropriate school structures, relationships and communication channels are in place, the news will reach the people who can do something about it.

These schools (including Dromana Secondary College and Salesian Catholic College Rupertswood) put in place structures to ensure that, for each student, there is one staff member whose job it is to monitor their progress and their wellbeing, and communicate with their family. This can be done through a 'house' system of multi-age home rooms, where the student has the same home room teacher throughout their schooling or for all of middle school or senior school. In addition, a year level coordinator might follow one cohort through their school years.

This structure ensures that when a classroom teacher has concerns about a student's academic progress, attendance, behaviour or peer relationships, there is a natural person to whom those observations should be made. Similarly, when parents wish to flag their concerns or provide the school with information about home circumstances, there is a natural person *who knows the student* to contact. When the student wants to talk to someone about issues of concern, there is someone *they know* whose job it is to help them.

The identification of students at risk under this strategy is a process of consultation between home room teachers/year level coordinators and MIPs coordinators, welfare coordinators, etc. This consultation might be structured around a checklist of known risk factors, to ensure each student is thoroughly considered and not simply passed over because they are doing well academically.

Schools that have implemented this approach believe that it is proving effective in identifying at risk young people and improving retention. This approach to identifying at risk young people also addresses some of the risk factors around student withdrawal and disengagement, as it requires individual teachers to take responsibility for maintaining communication and positive relationships with a small group of students, and for fostering positive peer relationships within the group.

This approach does not allow for detailed analysis of which risk factors are more likely to lead to school leaving, nor for follow-up analysis of the effectiveness of intervention strategies. It does, however, accept that schools as they currently operate might be contributing to student disengagement rather than focusing on the 'problems' of individual students. It invests in and relies on teacher-student relationships, and ensures that *someone* is responsible for understanding the needs of each student.

Table 5: Considering teacher-student connection strategy against criteria for suitability for widespread use in Victoria.

| Criteria for comparison | Teacher-Student Connection strategy |
|---|---|
| Validity of tool, supported by evidence base: | No evaluation undertaken. See the discussion of potential effectiveness measures in <i>Evaluation</i> under the Common Approaches section above. It would be very interesting to compare the effectiveness of this approach <i>as a predictor of school leaving</i> with more quantitative tools. |
| Favourable evaluation by MIPs Coordinators/teachers: | This strategy places strong pastoral demands on some teachers. It is, however, an extension of the current situation in most schools, where potentially at risk students are identified by teaching staff. |
| Appropriate reading age: | The strategy does not require any written input from students. |
| Ease of administration: | The strategy is not 'easy' to implement, as it can require significant structural and timetable change across the school. However, it should be noted that it is simultaneously a mechanism for identification <i>and</i> an intervention to reduce risk factors. |
| Ease of analysis to determine risk: | There is no analysis required, though consultations to develop lists of 'at risk' students would benefit from being regular, structured and thorough. |
| Availability to Victorian Government Secondary Schools from 2006 with potential to be extended to Catholic and Independent schools: | Yes. |
| Ability to meet Department approval requirements including privacy and research: | Yes |
| Low/no cost: | The redistribution of teaching loads to allow for pastoral duties has resourcing implications. |
| Applicability of tool to secondary schools: | Yes |
| Applicability of tool to other education and training contexts: | The prospect of training providers using a personal, case management approach to support all young people to progress through their programs and onto positive destinations is appealing, but not currently on the agenda. |

Checklist strategy

The Gippsland Regional Office of the Department of Education and Training, working with Traralgon Secondary College and other providers, has developed a detailed checklist of known risk factors for teachers and year level coordinators to use. The thinking behind the project is to prompt teachers to consider some of the less obvious signs that a student may be at risk. It was originally used at year 9 so that decisions could be made regarding participation in the 'at risk' program at the senior campus. The use of the checklist to identify 'at risk' students was integrated with a process for referral to alternative programs, support services and transition assistance.

This checklist has been refined over time, and now includes the following prompts for teachers to consider.

Learning difficulties

School refusal, chronic absence, stated intention to leave school

Chronic failure at school

Alienation – dislike of teachers, anger and resentment about school

Disruptive behaviour

Passivity

Frequent changes of school

Lack of interest in obtaining a satisfying job/pathway

Unstable home situation

Family conflict or feeling that family is not supportive

Alienated from home, homeless

Conflict with peers, gangs

Pregnancy and motherhood

Offending, vandalism and graffiti

Financial insecurity

Social withdrawal

Self harm

Poor self image, low self esteem

Poor social adjustment

Poor organisational skills

Trauma

Psychological difficulties

Drug or alcohol problems

Medical difficulties

At the end of the checklist, the STAR team at the school is required to make a 'global judgment' on the overall level of risk. Most schools have a limited number of places in programs for at risk young people, and this approach aimed to ensure that the participants were those judged to be at greatest risk. Again, it may be useful to add 'gifted and talented' to this list, to reflect research that shows many of these students do not complete Year 12.

(The South Gippsland School Focused Youth Service has a similar checklist, presented in a spreadsheet rather than a table, for teachers to use. This does not appear to include the 'global judgment' element.)

This checklist strategy is similar to the Brimbank Melton LLEN approach, in that there is significant teacher input and the final assessment of the level of risk remains in the hands of the school staff.²⁶ It provides guidance about what characteristics the school believes contribute to risk. This strategy relies on the extent to which teachers know about the details of a student's home circumstances or peer relationships. It requires a commitment of staff time to complete the checklist for each student. It has the potential to provide data regarding the risk profile of a year-level cohort of students, and therefore to assist mainstream programming, though this does not appear to have occurred to date.

Table 6: Considering checklist strategy against criteria for suitability for widespread use in Victoria.

| Criteria for comparison | Gippsland Checklist strategy |
|---|--|
| Validity of tool, supported by evidence base: | No evaluation undertaken. See the discussion of potential effectiveness measures in <i>Evaluation</i> under the <i>Common Approaches</i> section above. |
| Favourable evaluation by MIPs Coordinators/teachers: | It is an extension of the current situation in most schools, where potentially at risk students are identified by teaching staff. It offers some guidance regarding what characteristics teachers should be looking for in considering risk. |
| Appropriate reading age: | The strategy does not require any written input from students. |
| Ease of administration: | The strategy is easy, though time consuming, to administer. |
| Ease of analysis to determine risk: | There is no analysis required, though analysis by cohort and outcomes would be valuable. The identification of 'risk' remains a judgment call by teachers. |
| Availability to Victorian Government Secondary Schools from 2006 with potential to be extended to Catholic and Independent schools: | Yes. |
| Ability to meet Department approval requirements including privacy and research: | Yes, though access and archiving protocols would be advisable. |
| Low/no cost: | Yes |
| Applicability of tool to secondary schools: | Yes |
| Applicability of tool to other education and training contexts: | This tool could be applicable to other education and training contexts, but would rely heavily on the extent to which the staff at those providers knew a great deal about each individual student. |

²⁶ However, there are questions here that the Brimbank Melton LLEN tool would answer automatically and reliably from CASES data.

Other strategies

In addition to these tools and strategies, there are surveys regarding a student's intentions to complete or leave school (Whittlesea Youth Commitment, and Frankston schools working with the Brotherhood of St Laurence), social emotional well-being surveys (ACER), case management processes with checklists (School Focused Youth Service), and so on. These are not designed to act as comprehensive predictors of which students are at risk of early school leaving, but are useful support tools that might be used by schools for certain cohorts or at certain points in the student's progression through school.

Evaluation

The current practice in schools *might* be as effective as any other available tool or strategy. In other words, focusing on the major risk factors, and relying on human interaction to pick up students effected by the less common ones, might capture just as many of the 'at risk cohort' as any other approach. Unfortunately, at this time, there is no way of knowing if this is the case. No information was provided to this project (or to the MIPs Review) to suggest that schools have reviewed the effectiveness of these common strategies to identify 'at risk' young people. While the criteria for success would depend on the definition of 'at risk' and the values of the school, certain questions could be asked annually to assess whether the school was getting better at identifying its 'at risk' students. Some examples of data to inform a *retention* focus include:

- How many students exited prior to completing year 12?
- How many students left school without having been identified as 'at risk' at least six months before? Did they have any common characteristics (i.e. are there risk factors that our current approach misses consistently)?
- What proportion of those identified as 'at risk' did leave school early, and did they have any common characteristics (i.e. are particular risk factors more likely to lead to early school leaving in this specific school community? Are our responses/programs failing to encourage particular kinds of students to stay on?)?

Some examples of data to inform a *transition* focus include:

- How many students left school without having been identified as 'at risk' at least six months before? Did they have any common characteristics (i.e. are there risk factors that our current approach misses consistently)?
- How many students exited to an 'unknown destination' prior to completing year 12?
- How many students exited to part-time or insecure employment?
- Are the students still engaged in an alternative pathway 12 months after leaving school? Or still engaged when they would have been due to complete Year 12? (i.e. did school-facilitated transition lead to successful engagement to Year 12 or equivalent?).

Conclusion

At this stage in the development of tools and strategies, it would be inappropriate to issue a mandated approach to identifying young people at risk. The more sophisticated tools have not yet been proven as effective predictors of early school leaving, and the simpler approaches have not been methodically evaluated. Even if one strategy or tool was to prove its effectiveness in one

context, this may not be suitable to all contexts.

However, schools are seeking guidance and would value the Department's assistance in sourcing a range of tools and strategies to support their work. This would reduce widespread 'reinventing the wheel', and would enable schools to choose strategies that were aligned with their school's context, structure, culture and values.

All schools should be required to reflect on the accuracy of the identification strategies they are using. School analysis of all early school leavers (including those that make a transition to another education and training provider) should consider:

- The average time before leaving that the student had been identified as 'at risk'
- The common characteristics of those early school leavers who are identified as 'at risk' early, and those who take the school by surprise

This kind of reflection will inform an evolving discussion of the most effective strategy (or strategies) to identify young people 'at risk'.

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