

Engaging Minds: Improving Student Retention through Best Practices

**Erasmus+ KA220-SCH - Cooperation partnerships in
school education**

Engaging Minds Handbook:

Practical Strategies for Student Engagement and Preventing Early School Leaving



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Preface

The Engaging Minds Handbook has been developed within the framework of the Erasmus+ project Engaging Minds, which focuses on understanding and addressing the factors that influence student engagement, motivation, and the risk of school dropout in upper-secondary education.

Across Europe, schools increasingly face the challenge of supporting students who remain formally enrolled but may experience disengagement, pressure, or uncertainty about the value of their studies and future pathways. The objective of this handbook is to provide educators, school leaders, and other education stakeholders with practical knowledge and evidence-based insights on how student engagement can be strengthened and dropout risks addressed.

The handbook combines different types of contributions developed throughout the project. It begins with an overview of the key concepts related to school dropout and student retention, drawing on existing research and policy discussions. It then presents empirical evidence collected from students and educators in participating schools, offering a closer look at the factors that shape motivation, belonging, and perceived support within the learning environment.

Beyond the data analysis, the handbook highlights best practices, pedagogical approaches, and practical strategies that schools can adopt to strengthen student retention. Case studies from partner countries illustrate how concrete interventions can be implemented in real educational contexts, providing examples that educators may adapt to their own settings.

By combining research insights, field evidence, and practical experiences, the Engaging Minds Handbook aims to support schools in creating more inclusive, supportive, and motivating learning environments.

This work has been made possible thanks to the contribution of all students, educators, and project partners involved in the research activities and development of the handbook, whose insights and experiences have been essential in shaping its content.

The project partners hope that this resource will contribute to ongoing efforts across Europe to promote student well-being, strengthen engagement, and reduce the risk of early school leaving.

1. Understanding Early School Leaving and Student Retention

Education systems across Europe increasingly recognise that ensuring students remain engaged in education until the completion of upper secondary schooling is a key factor for both individual development and social cohesion. When students leave education prematurely, the consequences extend beyond academic outcomes. Early school leaving is associated with lower employment prospects, higher risks of social exclusion, and reduced opportunities for lifelong learning. For this reason, improving student retention has become a central priority for policymakers, educators, and researchers.

Within this context, the concepts of **early school leaving** and **student retention** are closely interconnected. Early school leaving refers to the process through which students disengage from education and eventually leave the system without completing upper secondary education. Student retention, on the other hand, refers to the ability of schools and education systems to support students in remaining engaged in learning and successfully completing their educational pathways.

Understanding these concepts requires looking beyond simple statistics. School dropout is rarely the result of a single event or decision. Instead, it is typically the outcome of a gradual process of disengagement that may begin several years before a student leaves education. Identifying and addressing the factors that contribute to this process is therefore essential for developing effective retention strategies.

1.1 Defining Early School Leaving

School dropout, often referred to in European policy discussions as **early school leaving**, describes the situation in which young people leave education or training without completing upper secondary education and without pursuing further learning opportunities (European Commission, 2020). At the European level, this phenomenon is commonly measured through an indicator that captures the proportion of individuals aged 18-24 who have completed at most lower secondary education and are no longer participating in education or training. This statistical definition allows policymakers to monitor trends and compare educational outcomes across countries.

However, while this indicator provides a useful benchmark, it does not fully capture the complexity of the processes that lead to early school leaving. In practice, early school leaving rarely occurs as a sudden event. Instead, it typically emerges as the result of a **gradual process of disengagement** that may begin much earlier during the secondary school years. Students may initially experience declining motivation, academic difficulties, or a weakening sense of belonging within the school environment. Over time, these challenges can accumulate, leading to irregular attendance, reduced participation in learning activities, and eventually withdrawal from education.

Educational research increasingly emphasises that school dropout should not be understood solely as the moment when a student formally leaves the education system. Rather, it is a **multidimensional** phenomenon that can also include other forms of school failure. Persistent absences, repeated academic failure, low academic performance, or prolonged delays in educational progression may all represent early manifestations of disengagement. In some cases, students may even complete their formal education but without acquiring the necessary competencies and skills to actively participate in social and professional life. These situations highlight the broader dimension of what can be described as **hidden or indirect dropout**, where the educational trajectory formally continues but fails to provide meaningful learning outcomes.

Several studies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; European Commission, 2020) have attempted to explain the factors that contribute to this phenomenon. Research frequently highlights the influence of **socio-economic background, family context, and broader social environments**, which can shape students' opportunities and expectations within the education system. At the same time, the school environment itself plays a crucial role. The ability of teachers to create supportive learning environments, encourage

participation, and foster positive relationships with students can significantly influence students' motivation and engagement.

Beyond these structural and institutional factors, the experience of early school leaving can also be linked to students' personal development and identity formation. The transition from childhood to adolescence is often accompanied by significant psychological and social changes. During this period, students are required to make important educational choices that may influence their future pathways. For some young people, difficulties in defining their own interests, aspirations, or sense of identity can make these choices particularly challenging. When students begin to perceive academic failure as a reflection of their personal value rather than a temporary difficulty, disengagement from school may become more likely.

Furthermore, school represents much more than a place of academic instruction. It is one of the first social environments outside the family where young people develop relationships, encounter diverse perspectives, and interact with adult role models. When students disengage from school, they are therefore not only abandoning a learning pathway but also distancing themselves from an important space of social interaction and personal development.

For these reasons, early school leaving should be understood not only as a final educational outcome but also as a **progressive and multifaceted process of disengagement** involving academic, social, and psychological dimensions. Recognising the early signs of this process is essential for schools and educational institutions seeking to implement effective strategies to prevent early school leaving and support student retention.

1.2 Factors Contributing to Student Disengagement

The reasons why students disengage from education are diverse and often interconnected. Research across European education systems shows that early school leaving rarely stems from a single cause; rather, it reflects the interaction of academic, social, and institutional factors. As outlined in Table 1, Key Concepts: Early School Leaving, Student Retention and Disengagement, student disengagement often represents a gradual process that precedes early school leaving, highlighting the importance of identifying risk factors at an early stage.

Early School Leaving	The situation in which young people leave education or training without completing upper secondary education and without pursuing further learning opportunities.
Student Retention	The ability of schools and education systems to keep students engaged in education and support them in successfully completing their studies.
Disengagement	A gradual reduction in a student's participation, motivation, or connection to the school environment, often preceding dropout.

Table 1: Key Concepts: Early School Leaving, Student Retention and Disengagement

Academic challenges frequently play an important role. Students who struggle with core subjects such as mathematics, reading, or language learning may gradually lose confidence in their ability to succeed. When academic support is insufficient or arrives too late, these difficulties can lead to frustration and declining motivation.

Social and emotional factors are equally significant. A student's sense of belonging within the school community, the quality of relationships with teachers and peers, and the ability to manage stress or personal challenges all influence engagement with learning. Students who feel isolated, unsupported, or disconnected from the school environment may be more likely to disengage.

Institutional factors within the education system can also contribute to dropout risks. **Rigid curricula, limited flexibility in learning pathways, or insufficient support structures for students with diverse needs** may make it difficult for some learners to remain engaged. In contrast, schools that provide personalised learning opportunities, mentoring systems, and supportive learning environments are better positioned to respond to students experiencing difficulties.

Recognising the multifaceted nature of disengagement is essential for designing effective interventions. Policies and practices aimed at preventing dropout must therefore address not only academic performance but also the broader social and institutional context in which learning takes place.

1.3 Student Retention as a Preventive Approach

In response to the challenges associated with early school leaving, many education systems have shifted their focus from reacting to early school leaving after it occurs to **preventing disengagement through proactive retention strategies**. Student retention refers to the set of practices, policies, and support mechanisms implemented by educational institutions to ensure that students remain engaged in learning and successfully complete their studies.

While student permanence may simply reflect a student's personal decision to remain in education, **student retention implies an active institutional effort**. Schools and education authorities adopt targeted measures to support students throughout their learning journey, addressing potential barriers that might otherwise lead them to disengage from education.

Effective retention strategies typically emphasise **the early identification of students who may be at risk of disengagement**. Schools increasingly rely on attendance monitoring, academic performance indicators, and teacher observations to detect early warning signs. When such signals are identified, targeted interventions, such as tutoring, mentoring, counselling, or additional academic support, can be implemented before disengagement becomes more severe or irreversible.

Understanding the reasons why students disengage from education is also essential for designing effective retention strategies. Students may leave school for a variety of reasons, including academic difficulties, financial challenges, personal circumstances, or difficulties balancing school with work and family responsibilities. In many cases, disengagement is linked to a combination of factors that influence the student's ability to participate fully in school life.

For this reason, schools increasingly adopt a **student-centred approach** that seeks to understand each student's individual circumstances. Identifying the specific challenges faced by students enables institutions to implement targeted support measures that address the root causes of disengagement.

Equally important is the creation of learning environments that promote a strong sense of belonging and motivation. Positive relationships between students and teachers, opportunities for collaborative learning, and recognition of individual progress all contribute to sustaining engagement. When students feel welcomed, supported, and valued within their school community, they are more likely to remain committed to their educational pathway.

Flexible educational pathways also play a crucial role in supporting retention. Many students benefit from alternative routes within the education system that allow them to progress at their own pace or combine academic and vocational learning. Such pathways provide opportunities for students who might otherwise leave education to remain connected to learning and continue developing their skills.

Finally, improving retention requires schools to pay attention not only to academic performance but also to the **overall student experience**. Access to learning resources, clear communication with school staff, effective administrative support, and the availability of guidance services all influence students' ability to remain engaged in their studies.

Ultimately, improving student retention requires a **holistic approach** that combines academic support, social inclusion, and institutional flexibility. By addressing the underlying causes of disengagement and creating supportive learning environments, schools can significantly reduce the risk of early school leaving and help more students successfully complete their educational journeys.

2. Best Practices to Prevent and Address Dropout

This chapter is dedicated to the comparative analysis of school dropout risks and student retention strategies across the partner countries and to the identification of evidence-based best practices that can be translated into practical guidance for educators. The content is grounded in comparative evidence, validated policy approaches, and real-world practices implemented across different education systems.

2.1 Comparative risk and protective factors

Several interconnected risk factors shape students' likelihood of disengagement. Socioeconomic disadvantage, including material deprivation and limited access to learning resources, increases stress exposure and constrains educational opportunities. Academic underachievement or sudden declines in performance often function as early warning signs, frequently linked to gaps in foundational skills or insufficient instructional support. Persistent absenteeism and behavioural changes further reflect weakening attachment to school and commonly precede more severe disengagement. Challenges related to mental health and well-being, such as stress, anxiety, loneliness, and low perceived support, play a central role, particularly when support services are fragmented or difficult to access. Migration-related barriers, including language acquisition needs, interrupted schooling, and limited familiarity with education systems, can intensify existing vulnerabilities. In addition, weak school climate, experiences of bullying, and low sense of belonging undermine students' connection to school, while institutional barriers such as rigid educational pathways, insufficient guidance, and poorly coordinated services restrict students' ability to adapt their learning trajectories. Key transition points within education pathways, including progression from lower to upper secondary education and programme choice, represent periods of heightened risk where several of these factors often converge.

At the same time, this chapter identifies protective factors that consistently support student persistence across contexts. Central among these is the presence of stable and trusted adult relationships within the school environment, such as those with teachers, mentors, or counsellors, which strengthen students' sense of safety, belonging, and motivation. Clear structures and high-quality teaching, supported by differentiation, explicit expectations, and meaningful feedback, foster engagement and academic confidence. Strong guidance and career education help students understand available options and perceive education as relevant to their future, while integrated student welfare services and timely referral mechanisms reduce the escalation of difficulties. Early identification of disengagement signals, combined with supportive and non-stigmatising responses, mitigates the accumulation of risk. Family engagement and community partnerships extend support beyond the school context, and flexible, inclusive learning pathways, such as bridging options, modular learning, or alternative routes, enable students to remain connected to education even when their circumstances change.

Together, the risk and protective factors outlined in this chapter provide a structured lens for understanding variation in student engagement and retention. They highlight how disengagement develops through cumulative processes and how supportive conditions at multiple levels can counterbalance risk and sustain participation in education across diverse settings.

2.2 National policy context and best practices

2.2.1 Denmark

Denmark frames retention through a long-term education policy goal: by 2030, at least 90% of 25-year-olds should complete a youth education, and the share of young people up to 25 not connected to education or the labour market should be halved. This goal supports a strong policy focus on transitions, guidance, and preparatory options for learners who do not yet have the prerequisites to complete a general or vocational upper secondary pathway.

YouthWiki's Denmark chapter on preventing early leaving highlights targets and describes system measures that combine education pathways with labour market orientation. Preparatory basic education (FGU, Danish: Forberedende Grunduddannelse) is a key pathway for students needing support to progress towards education or employment. Evaluations from national bodies illustrate the importance of implementation quality, coordination and monitoring for student outcomes.

Common early school leaving risk points

- Transition from compulsory schooling to upper secondary pathways (choice and readiness).
- Mismatch between programme choice and student interests/skills, especially for vocational routes.
- Low academic confidence and weak foundational skills leading to repeated failure experiences.
- Limited support continuity when students move between school, training and employment-related services.

Practical translation

- Strong guidance and 'next-step clarity' (students understand their options and have a plan).
- Preparatory/bridging provision to strengthen readiness (skills, study habits, confidence).
- Close links to workplaces and practical learning for motivation and relevance.
- Multi-actor coordination at local level (education + employment services + youth support).

For school-level translation, Danish practice can be operationalised through: structured transition counselling in the final years of compulsory education; short 'bridging' modules for students with foundational gaps; exposure to professions (taster days/weeks); and coordinated support plans for students at risk.

2.2.2 Sweden

Sweden's upper secondary education (gymnasieskola) is characterised by multiple academic and vocational programmes and a strong emphasis in steering documents on lifelong learning and student autonomy. Evidence from Swedish upper secondary students during the pandemic indicates that learners' ability to manage their studies varies substantially; students with weaker socioeconomic backgrounds and some migrant learners reported greater difficulties and a stronger need for clear structure and support.

Common early school leaving risk points

- Entry into upper secondary programmes for students who narrowly meet prerequisites or lack confidence.
- High absenteeism patterns (often linked to well-being, motivation and learning difficulties).
- Distance between school demands and students' perceived relevance, especially where guidance is weak.
- Digital and self-regulated learning demands (especially in blended/remote periods) without sufficient scaffolding.

Practical translation

- Early identification and personalised support pathways (e.g., local cooperation models such as those described in European VET toolkits).
- Academic support that combines structure with autonomy (study coaching, learning strategies, clear instructions).
- Well-being support integrated with learning (school health services, counselling, mentoring).

- Inclusive practices for migrant and disadvantaged learners (language-aware teaching, clear communication, predictable routines).

Practical translation: implementation of an early warning routine that triggers a supportive meeting when absenteeism rises or performance drops; offer structured tutoring and study coaching; ensure every student has access to a trusted adult mentor; and co-design learning supports using student feedback.

2.2.3 Finland

Finland strengthened its retention approach by extending compulsory education to age 18 and by improving guidance and student welfare services. The reform aims to ensure that, after comprehensive school, all young people gain an upper secondary qualification. This also requires more focus on guidance and transition planning at the end of comprehensive school (grade 9) when the students make a choice between general upper secondary school and vocational education. Financial barriers are addressed through measures that make learning materials and upper secondary education free for those covered by extended compulsory education, with only minor expenses for certain materials.

Digital and learning support capacity

European-level evidence from the pandemic highlights Finland's strong digital readiness, supported by a national network of tutor teachers and initiatives to improve device access. These measures support continuity of learning and can reinforce retention when used for blended learning, differentiated teaching, and targeted tutoring.

Common early school leaving risk points

- Transition planning at the end of compulsory schooling (matching student strengths with pathways).
- Learning difficulties and other special needs identified in comprehensive school not adequately addressed in upper secondary education
- Students with multi-factor vulnerabilities (learning difficulties + well-being challenges + family stress).
- Geographic differences in access to specialised supports (rural/remote contexts).

Practical Translation

- Strengthened guidance, tracking and follow-up during transition to upper secondary education.
- Integrated student welfare services and early support for learning difficulties.
- Tutor-teacher networks and teacher professional support enabling differentiated instruction.
- Digital inclusion measures ensuring that blended learning does not widen inequities.

Schools can translate these themes by building a structured transition support plan for all students, with intensified guidance for students at risk; ensuring rapid access to learning support and welfare services; and using teacher peer-support models (e.g., tutor teachers) to strengthen differentiated instruction.

2.2.4 Ireland

Ireland's retention strategy combines targeted supports for disadvantage with school completion and education welfare services. YouthWiki describes the DEIS Plan as a main policy initiative aimed at improving retention, complemented by the School Completion Programme (SCP) and education welfare supports focused on attendance and early intervention.

Common early school leaving risk points

- Socioeconomic disadvantage and concentrated school-level deprivation (DEIS context).
- Attendance issues and disengagement signals emerging early, often connected to family and community factors.
- Transitions (particularly into upper secondary and into post-school options) without sustained guidance.

Practical translation

- Targeted disadvantage supports (DEIS) linked to retention and participation outcomes.
- School Completion Programme: structured local strategies to identify and support young people at risk of early school leaving.
- Education welfare services and multi-stakeholder collaboration at local level.
- Guidance that integrates attendance, learning supports and well-being.

Ireland's Success Story

Ireland is often cited as a European success story in relation to early school leaving (ESL), having reduced national ESL rates substantially over the past two decades. While rates in the European Union fell from 17.6% in 2000 to 9.5% in 2023, Ireland reduced its ESL rate from a record high of 12.50% in December of 2005 (Trading Economics, 2026) to 4% in 2023 through initiatives like the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Plan (Department of Education, n.d) and TUSLA Education Support Services (TESS). These programs address inequity through offering guidance, alternative pathways, and promoting attendance and retention (Gardezi et al., 2025).

The DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Program

DEIS schools receive targeted interventions such as additional funding (e.g. €180 million from 2022-2024), reduced pupil-teacher ratios, school meals, and staff professional development. It also provides enhanced guidance and counselling services for second-level schools, along with alternative, more flexible, vocationally-oriented programs such as the Junior Certificate School Program (JCSP), the Leaving Certificate Applied Program (LCA), and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Program (LCVP) (Department of Education, 2017).

TUSLA Education Support Service (TESS)

Another significant initiative is the TUSLA¹ Education Support Services (TESS), which seeks to enhance attendance, participation, and retention in education (Department of Education & Inspectorate, 2015); TUSLA: Child and Family Agency, 2024). TESS encompasses several key components, including the Education Welfare Services, which aim to ensure consistent school attendance among school-aged children. The Home School Community Liaison (HSCCL) program is designed to improve children's academic outcomes by providing support to parents or guardians, encouraging their active involvement in their children's learning.

The School Completion Program (SCP)

Additionally, the School Completion Program (SCP) offers targeted support for primary and post-primary students who are at risk of early school leaving or who are currently disengaged from formal education and have not successfully transitioned to alternative educational pathways or employment

¹ **Tusla** is Ireland's **Child and Family Agency** (Irish: *Tusla - An Ghníomhaireacht um Leanaí agus an Teaghlach*). It is the state body responsible for child protection, welfare, and family support services.

opportunities (TUSLA: Child and Family Agency, 2024). In addition, the Department of Education reported a retention rate of 93.2% for pupils sitting the Leaving Certificate examination in 2022 (Department of Education, 2023).

Persistent Patterns of Educational Disengagement

However, research consistently demonstrates that low headline rates can obscure persistent, concentrated patterns of educational disengagement among specific groups of young people, including those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, children in care, traveller and migrant students, and young people with additional or complex needs (Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Heeran Flynn, 2017). Nonetheless, recently implemented initiatives like DEIS and TUSLA education services in Ireland appear to have fruitful outcomes (Gardezi et al., 2025).

Therefore, this section provides a critical reflection on the Irish landscape, drawing on national, international literature and policy documentation to examine how early school leaving is understood, the strategies that have been implemented to address it, and the tensions that continue to shape outcomes. The section aims to highlight both strengths and weaknesses in Irish policy and practice, offering learning points for a wider European audience.

Early School Leaving in the Irish Education Context

In the Irish context, early school leavers are typically referred to as individuals aged between 18 - 24 who leave education without upper secondary school qualifications (Gardezi et al., 2025). Irish research and policy increasingly conceptualise Early School Leaving (ESL) as the final stage of a long process of disengagement, rather than a single decision or event (Heeran Flynn, 2017). This process often begins in primary school and intensifies during key transitions, particularly the move from primary to post-primary education and from junior to senior cycle (Byrne & Smyth, 2010).

Some of the risk factors identified in the literature span multiple domains:

- Individual factors: These include low academic achievement, poor attendance, behavioural difficulties, and emotional distress.
- Family and social factors: These include poverty, family instability, parental educational history, and experiences of care.
- School and systemic factors: These include curriculum rigidity, exclusionary discipline, poor relationships, and weak transition supports.

Even short spells of absence of one to two days at age 13 are linked to lower Leaving Certificate grades. There is a very large performance gap related to chronic absence, defined as missing 20 or more days a year, a gap of over 80 Leaving Certificate points even taking account of a range of other factors that affect performance. Longer school absence at age 13 is significantly related to lower chances of going on to higher education and of achieving a degree by age 25 (Murphy & Stapleton, 2024).

Longer school absence is linked to poorer labour market outcomes, including lower chances of securing professional or managerial roles and reduced earnings. Moreover, this also predicts higher stress, more depressive symptoms and lower life satisfaction in early adulthood between 20-25 years age. Those students who were frequently absent report poorer physical health, weaker social ties and lower trust in others (Murphy & Stapleton, 2024). To sum up, missing school appears to adversely impact key development processes that shape well-being, resilience and social integration later in life.

Multi-level Understanding of Early School Leaving Complexity

This multi-level understanding aligns with ecological and relational frameworks, which emphasise that disengagement emerges from interactions between students and their educational environments over time. One example is Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which provides a framework that

explains the interaction of different environmental layers and the complex network of relationships that influence child development and, of course, learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These layers include immediate environments like family and school and broader influences such as cultural norms, laws, and traditions.

Bronfenbrenner outlines five interlocking environmental systems which influence the development of young people: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

To understand how Ireland achieved these reductions, it is essential to examine the policy infrastructure underpinning this progress and associated limitations.

An Integrated National Infrastructure

One of the strongest features of the Irish response to ESL is the existence of a relatively integrated national infrastructure. The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme provides a long-standing equity framework, while TUSLA Education Support Services (TESS) brings together attendance (Education Welfare Service), family engagement (Home School Community Liaison), and targeted retention supports (School Completion Programme). This integrated architecture reflects a recognition that attendance, wellbeing, engagement, and learning are interconnected, and it compares favourably with more fragmented systems (Donlevy et al., 2019) (e.g. where attendance, welfare and academic support may operate under different agencies) in other European contexts (Gardezi et al., 2025).

Despite these strong frameworks, the literature highlights significant variability in implementation and impact. Schools with the highest levels of need often face the greatest challenges in sustaining effective practice due to staff turnover, workload pressures, and limited access to external support (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). As a result, good practice is frequently dependent on individual leadership or commitment, rather than being structurally embedded. To re-iterate, recent case studies have started to emerge indicating positive impact (Gardezi et al., 2025),

Successful Strategies

Strategies That Have Worked Well Addressing the school absence effectively requires a multi-layered approach that combines early intervention, relational supports, family partnerships and flexible learning pathways.

Early detection of poor attendance

Poor attendance is consistently identified as one of the strongest predictors of ESL (Heeran Flynn, 2017). Irish schools have increasingly adopted early warning systems to track attendance, punctuality, and engagement. Evidence suggests these systems are effective when combined with supportive, welfare-oriented responses, such as mentoring, family engagement, and problem-solving interventions. In contrast, attendance monitoring that relies primarily on escalation or sanction has limited impact and may worsen disengagement for vulnerable students (Byrne & Smyth, 2010).

Strong Teacher-Student Relationships

Strong teacher–student relationships, mentoring, and pastoral care structures emerge as critical protective factors in both Irish and international research (Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Gardezi et al., 2025). Schools that prioritise relational practice report higher levels of engagement and retention, particularly among students facing adversity.

However, such supports are often fragile, relying on individual staff capacity rather than whole-school systems. When pastoral work is marginalised by curriculum pressure or accountability demands, its preventative potential is diminished.

Home School Community Liaison Scheme

The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme represents a distinctive and valuable Irish approach to family engagement. Research indicates that relationship-based, trust-building engagement is far more effective than information-based or compliance-oriented contact, particularly in disadvantaged contexts (Heeran Flynn, 2017).

Nevertheless, the literature cautions against narrow or deficit-based models of parental involvement. Structural barriers such as poverty, precarious employment, and negative prior experiences of schooling can limit families' capacity to engage, regardless of motivation.

Alternative Learning Pathways

Ireland has developed a range of alternative and applied learning pathways, including the Junior Certificate School Programme, Leaving Certificate Applied, and Youthreach. These routes have been shown to re-engage learners who are poorly served by traditional academic curricula and to prevent permanent disengagement from education (Byrne & Smyth, 2010, Gardezi et al., 2025).

However, their effectiveness depends on status, resourcing, and choice. When such pathways are perceived as lower-status or used as default placements for disadvantaged students, they risk reinforcing educational inequality rather than reducing it.

2.3 EU-level best practices and transferable principles

A central principle emerging at EU level is the systematic use of data and monitoring to identify students at risk of disengagement. Effective practice combines quantitative indicators, such as attendance patterns, academic performance, and behavioural signals, with qualitative insights into students' learning experiences and well-being. In school settings, this integrated approach takes the form of early warning systems that are designed to trigger timely and supportive interventions rather than punitive measures. Multi-professional review processes, involving teachers, student welfare staff, and external services where relevant, strengthen the capacity to address underlying barriers related to learning difficulties, well-being, family circumstances, or language needs.

EU experience also underlines the importance of comprehensive and strategic planning based on a whole-system perspective. Early school dropout prevention is most effective when embedded within coherent strategies developed collaboratively across actors, including schools, social services, employment services, youth organisations, families, and students themselves. At local level, this coordination is reflected in shared protocols, cooperation agreements, and clear referral pathways, which reduce fragmentation and ensure continuity of support.

A further transferable principle concerns the management of educational transitions, which represent predictable points of increased vulnerability. European practice emphasises the systematic mapping of critical transitions, such as progression between education levels, programme selection, or the move from school to training or work and the allocation of clear responsibility for follow-up. Common responses include bridging programmes, peer mentoring, and structured case management approaches that support continuity during periods of change.

Across EU contexts, personalised support and validation of learning emerge as key mechanisms for sustaining motivation. Practices such as individual learning plans, mentoring, modular progression, and recognition of partial competences reduce the risk of "all-or-nothing" failure experiences and allow students to progress despite temporary setbacks. These approaches acknowledge diverse learning trajectories and reinforce students' sense of agency and achievement.

Finally, evidence from the COVID-19 period reinforces the value of inclusive blended learning and targeted tutoring. Small-group tutoring and differentiated instruction contribute to learning recovery and the reduction of gaps, particularly for students facing disadvantage. At the same time, blended learning approaches require careful design to ensure inclusion, including attention to device access,

accessibility, clear structure, and adequate teacher training. When these conditions are met, blended and in-person learning can complement each other and support sustained engagement.

Taken together, the practices and principles outlined in this chapter illustrate how retention-oriented systems combine early identification, coordinated planning, attention to transitions, personalised pathways, and inclusive learning environments. Their transferability lies not in replication of specific models, but in the shared emphasis on coherence, responsiveness, and equity.

Eurostat data on early leavers from education and training (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_14/default/table?lang=en) provides a shared reference framework for understanding long-term trends and structural differences across countries. Although this indicator refers to the 18-24 age group, it remains the main European benchmark for early school leaving and is used in the project to contextualise national trends affecting older upper secondary students.

This perspective is complemented by OECD indicators from Education at a Glance (<https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/>), with specific reference to the Sweden country note (https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024-country-notes_fab77ef0-en/sweden_e625bad6-en.html). OECD data is particularly relevant for the project's target group, as it focuses on upper secondary completion and non-completion and links educational outcomes to key risk factors such as socioeconomic background, migration status, and prior academic performance. These indicators are used comparatively across partner countries to identify recurring vulnerabilities and protective factors that educators need to be aware of in their daily practice.

The Cedefop VET Toolkit on tackling early leaving (<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-toolkit-tackling-early-leaving>) is used to identify concrete initiatives, including the Swedish Plug Innovation project (<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-toolkit-tackling-early-leaving/resources/pluginnovation>), which illustrates how early identification of at-risk students, personalised support pathways, and strong local cooperation can significantly improve retention in upper secondary and vocational education. Such examples are analysed alongside comparable initiatives identified by other partners in their national contexts.

To interpret quantitative trends and understand how dropout risks emerge within education systems, the activity also relies on qualitative system-level analysis. Eurydice documentation, including the national education system descriptions (for Sweden: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/sweden>), is used to analyse institutional structures, transition points, and policy arrangements influencing student retention. This system-level perspective makes it possible to compare how different education systems organise transitions, support students at risk, and structure alternative or flexible pathways, all of which are highly relevant for educators working with vulnerable learners.

National sources are then examined for each partner country to identify concrete retention measures and practices. In the Swedish case, national education statistics from Statistics Sweden (<https://www.scb.se/en/finding-statistics/statistics-by-subject-area/education-and-research/education-of-the-population/upper-secondary-school/>) are used to highlight programme-level patterns and groups at higher risk of non-completion, while policy-oriented information from YouthWiki (<https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/sweden/63-preventing-early-leaving-from-education-and-training-elet>) provides insight into prevention strategies, early intervention mechanisms, and cross-sector cooperation. Equivalent national sources are analysed by each partner country for Denmark, Finland, and Ireland, ensuring consistency in the comparative approach while respecting national specificities.

3 - Risk Factors Behind Dropout: Evidence from Students and Educators

Understanding the factors that contribute to student disengagement and potential dropout is a central objective of the Engaging Minds project. To gain a clearer picture of these dynamics, the project collected perspectives from both students and educators across participating countries. This section presents the empirical evidence gathered through the project's data collection activities, highlighting the main risk factors identified by students themselves as well as the observations provided by educators working directly in school environments. By combining these perspectives, the analysis aimed at identifying common patterns related to motivation, well-being, support systems, and perceived future relevance of education, and to connect these findings with broader evidence on student retention.

3.1. Methodology and data quality

The dataset contains 193 anonymous student responses collected through a structured questionnaire combining demographic questions, twelve closed Likert-scale items and two open-ended questions. The closed items cover key dimensions related to student motivation, perceived stress, teacher support, access to help, future orientation, belonging, peer relations, school well-being activities, social encouragement to complete studies, and thoughts of leaving school. The two open-ended questions invite students to describe the main challenge affecting their motivation and one action their school could take to make them feel more supported.

The achieved sample covers three of the four partner-country contexts included in the project: Denmark accounts for 39.9% of responses, Sweden for 31.1%, and Finland for 29.0%. Irish responses were also collected within the project; however, due to additional national data policy restrictions applied by the Irish partner institution, the Irish dataset was analysed separately at national level. The age profile of respondents is strongly concentrated in the intended upper-secondary target group, with 83.4% of students aged 16-18 and a further 10.4% aged 19. A substantial minority of respondents (42.5%) also report having a job, even part-time, which is relevant when interpreting findings related to workload, time pressure and overall student well-being.

Before proceeding with the analytical phase, a set of validation and cleaning procedures was conducted to ensure the reliability of the dataset. All respondents provided explicit GDPR consent. The analysis was conducted using a combination of data analysis tools (Excel, Python). These tools were used to perform data cleaning, coding of Likert-scale responses, descriptive statistical analysis, and visualisation of distributions across countries and indicators. They also supported the exploration of deeper statistical patterns within the dataset, including correlation analysis between key variables related to motivation, sense of belonging, perceived future relevance of education, stress, and students' thoughts about leaving school.

3.2 Engagement and Risk Factors in the Danish Dataset

The Danish dataset shows the highest level of perceived early school leaving risk among the three countries analyzed, with approximately 45% of students reporting that they are at risk of dropping out. This indicates that nearly half of the respondents have considered leaving their education prematurely.

The correlation analysis (Figure 1) reveals that stress is the strongest factor associated with early school leaving risk ($r = 0.31$). This positive relationship suggests that increases in perceived academic pressure or psychological strain correspond to a higher likelihood of students considering leaving school. At the same time, several variables display negative correlations with early school leaving risk, indicating that they may function as stabilizing elements within the educational environment. The strongest protective factor in the Danish dataset is engagement ($r = -0.35$), followed closely by belonging ($r = -0.30$) and school support ($r = -0.30$). These relationships suggest that students who experience stronger involvement in their learning activities and a greater sense of connection to the school environment are

less likely to report early school leaving risk. Social support also displays a negative relationship ($r = -0.14$), although the effect appears weaker than school-based factors.

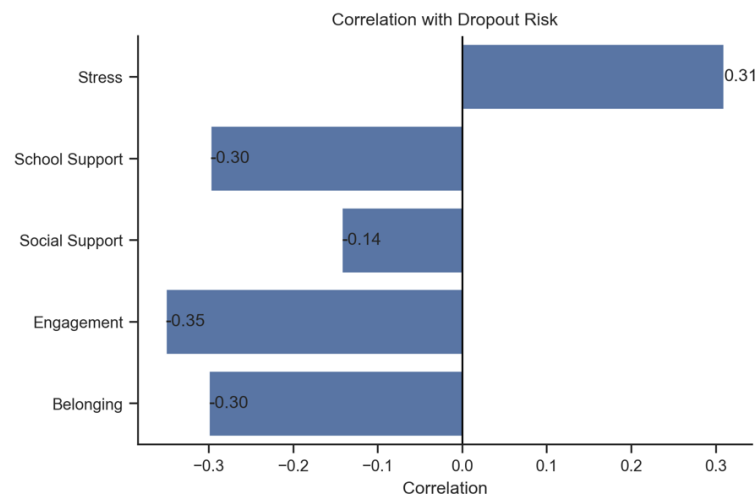


Figure 1. Correlation between student experience factors and early school leaving risk. Stress shows the strongest positive correlation with early school leaving risk. In contrast, engagement, belonging, school support, and social support are negatively correlated with early school leaving risk.

The analysis of student experience by risk group (Figure 2) reveals clear and systematic differences between students with low and high dropout risk. Overall, students classified as being at higher risk of dropout consistently report fewer positive experiences across several dimensions, including school support, engagement, belonging, and social support. These patterns suggest that students who are more likely to consider leaving school also tend to experience weaker connections to their educational environment.

One of the most noticeable differences appears in the engagement, where low-risk students report significantly higher scores compared to high-risk students. This indicates that students who feel more involved, motivated, and interested in their studies may be more likely to persist in their education. Similarly, belonging shows a clear gap between the two groups, with low-risk students reporting a stronger sense of inclusion and connection to the school community. Differences are also observed in school support and social support, although these gaps are somewhat smaller. Students at higher risk of dropout tend to perceive lower levels of support from teachers, school structures, and their social networks.

Stress levels are higher among students in the high-risk group, reinforcing the findings from the previous analysis that stress is strongly linked to dropout risk. The combined patterns of higher stress and lower engagement, belonging, and support indicated that dropout risk may arise from an accumulation of challenges rather than a single isolated factor.

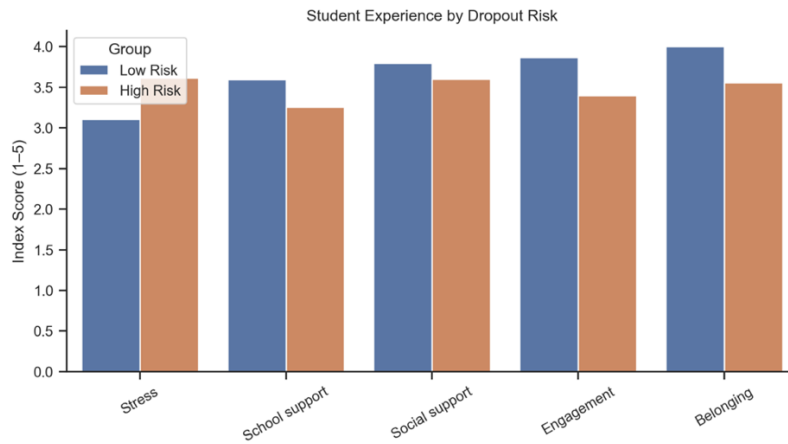


Figure 2. Student experience by early school leaving risk group. The figure compares the average index scores (1-5 scale) for key student experience factors between students with low early school leaving risk and those with high early school leaving risk

In the Danish dataset, students who report having a part-time job show a higher level of perceived dropout risk (74%) compared with students without employment (57%). This pattern indicates that combining school with work may increase the overall pressure experienced by some students.

A possible explanation is that students who work alongside their studies may face greater time constraints and competing responsibilities, which can make it more difficult to keep up with academic demands. Managing both schoolwork and employment may therefore contribute to higher stress levels and reduced capacity to focus on studies.

At the same time, the results suggest that employment may interact with other factors such as workload, stress, and academic expectations. For some students, balancing work and education may create additional strain that increases the likelihood of considering leaving education.

The categorical analysis of stress levels (Figure 3) further illustrates a clear gradient pattern. Early school leaving risk increases substantially as stress levels rise from 14% among students with low stress, to 40% among students with medium stress, and up to 65% among students with high stress. This steep increase indicates that stress may function as a threshold variable, where growing levels of pressure significantly increase the likelihood that students disengage from education and ultimately face a higher risk of dropping out.

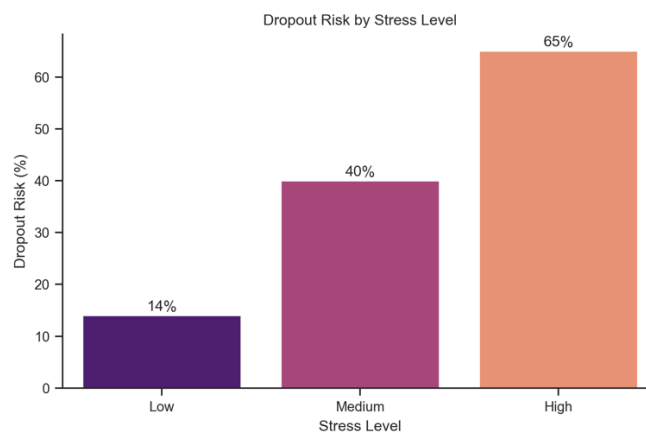


Figure 3. Early school leaving risk by stress level.

Age differences further reinforce this pattern (Figure 4). The highest early school leaving risk appears among students aged 16-17 (50%) and 18-19 (48%), which correspond to the later stages of secondary education. Students aged 20+ show a lower early school leaving risk (20%), while no measurable risk is observed among 14-15-year-olds, likely due to the small sample size. Taken together, the Danish results suggest that early school leaving risk emerges through the interaction between increasing stress and weakening student-school relationships.

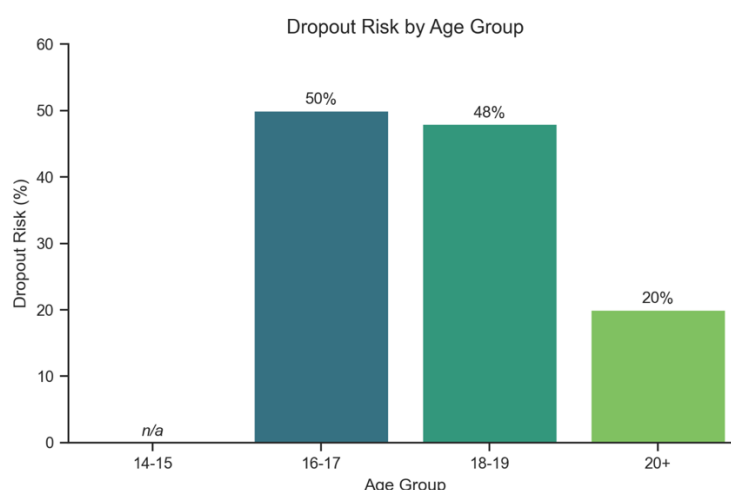


Figure 4. Early school leaving risk by age group in the Danish dataset.

The qualitative responses reveal several factors that influence students' ability to remain engaged in school. A frequently mentioned difficulty concerns heavy academic workload and long school days. Many students describe large amounts of homework, multiple assignments due at the same time, and extended school schedules that leave little time for rest or activities outside school. These pressures often lead to fatigue and make it harder for students to maintain motivation.

Another recurring theme relates to stress and mental strain. Some students report feeling overwhelmed by academic expectations, deadlines, or upcoming exams. Others mention persistent tiredness, concerns about failing, or difficulties maintaining concentration during lessons. These experiences suggest that psychological pressure can significantly affect students' engagement with schoolwork.

Students also point to classroom environment and learning conditions as important factors. Several responses highlight noise in the classroom, disruptive classmates, or lessons that feel monotonous or uninteresting. In some cases, students report that certain subjects feel irrelevant to their future, which reduces their willingness to invest effort in those courses.

A further issue concerns structural aspects of the school system, including long teacher lectures, unclear guidance from study counsellors, and limited time during lessons to complete assignments or ask questions. Some students indicate that uncertainty about their educational pathway or future career choices can also make it difficult to stay motivated.

When discussing what schools could do to improve support, students frequently mention reducing workload and distributing assignments more evenly, as well as shortening school days. Others suggest more respectful and understanding communication from teachers, clearer explanations of course material, and greater availability of academic assistance.

Several responses also emphasize the importance of listening to students and involving them more in the learning process, for example, through individual conversations, feedback opportunities, or improved guidance counselling. In addition, some students recommend creating more social and

extracurricular activities, providing accessible homework support sessions, and fostering an environment where students feel comfortable asking for help.

The insights gathered from educator interviews further complement the national and comparative analysis of the Danish context. Teachers consistently report that disengagement and early school leaving occur most frequently during the first months of upper secondary education, when students face a combination of academic demands, unmet expectations, and challenges in social integration. Many students enter programmes without a clear understanding of the workload, which can quickly lead to frustration and reduced motivation.

Educators identify early warning signs such as increasing absenteeism, reduced classroom participation, and social withdrawal as key indicators of emerging disengagement. In particular, the absence of strong peer connections during the first semester is highlighted as a critical risk factor, underlining the importance of belonging for student retention.

Across the interviews, the most significant protective factor is the quality of relationships between students and teachers. When students feel recognised, supported, and individually acknowledged, their engagement increases. However, teachers also emphasise that large class sizes, limited time, and high workloads significantly constrain their ability to provide personalised support and build these relationships effectively.

Educators further highlight that disengagement is typically the result of interacting academic, social, and personal factors, including mental health challenges and external life circumstances. As a result, effective responses require early and coordinated interventions, involving collaboration between teachers, counsellors, and school administration to address students' needs holistically.

A recurring theme is the limited availability of formal training and structured guidance for teachers in addressing student well-being and retention. Most educators rely on experience and informal learning, indicating a need for more up-to-date, research-informed professional development, particularly in areas such as student motivation, anxiety, and neurodiversity.

Finally, educators point to the importance of flexible and innovative approaches to teaching and learning, including mentorship models, adaptable learning tools, and supportive learning environments that respond to diverse student needs. Overall, while the Danish system offers structured support mechanisms, time constraints, resource limitations, and evolving student profiles remain key challenges in strengthening student engagement and retention.

The patterns observed in the Danish dataset reflect how key school-related factors such as stress, engagement, and sense of belonging interact within a specific educational setting. As discussed in the earlier chapters of this handbook, disengagement develops through the combination of multiple factors, extending beyond the school environment.

The data presented in this paragraph was collected within HF at Campus Vejle and therefore relates to a particular student group and pathway. Other upper secondary programmes, characterised by different structures, expectations, and student profiles, may show different dynamics.

This section therefore highlights how these factors operate in practice within this context, while the broader set of influences outlined earlier in the handbook remains essential for understanding how dropout risk develops across different settings.

3.3 Country analysis, Sweden

The Swedish sample is concentrated in the upper-secondary age range. Students aged 16 and 17 account for 73.3% of responses, while smaller groups are represented at ages 18, 19, 14 and 20+. A clear majority of students (70.0%) report that they do not currently have a job, while 30.0% say they do have one, even part-time (Figures 5 and 6). This matters for interpretation because the pressure of combining school with work may increase time pressure for part of the sample, even though most respondents are not in paid work.

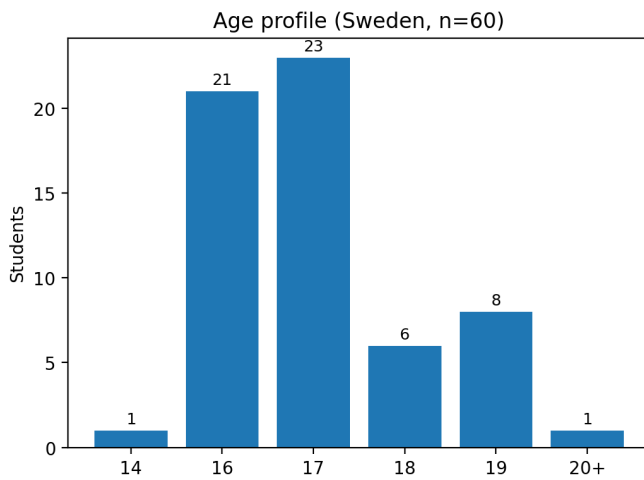


Figure 5: Age profile, Sweden

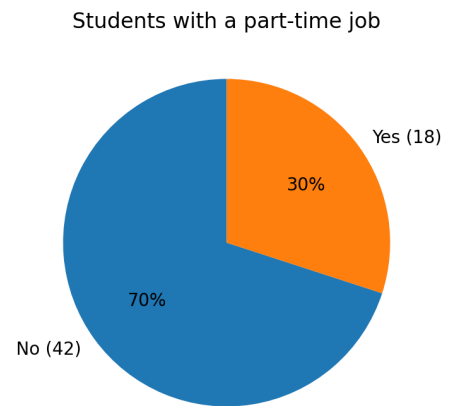


Figure 6: students with a part time job

The Swedish results show a strong motivational profile. 83.3% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they feel motivated to complete their education (Table 2 and Figure 7), while only 10.0% express disagreement. Students also tend to see education as relevant for their future: 73.3% agree that their education is preparing them well for what comes next, although 21.7% remain neutral on this point. This combination suggests that the Swedish cohort is broadly engaged and future-oriented, but that a meaningful minority may still need stronger help in connecting school with future pathways, careers, or personal goals.

Indicator	% agree / strongly agree
Motivated to complete education	83.3%
Stressed/overloaded by schoolwork	56.7%
Stressed/overloaded by homework	46.7%
Teachers supportive and approachable	56.7%
Know where to get help for academic challenges	68.3%
Education prepares me well for the future	73.3%
Sometimes think about leaving school	16.7%
Feel part of the school community	75.0%
Peer relationships make school experience positive	86.7%
Close people encourage staying in school	86.7%

Table 2: protective factors in the Swedish sample

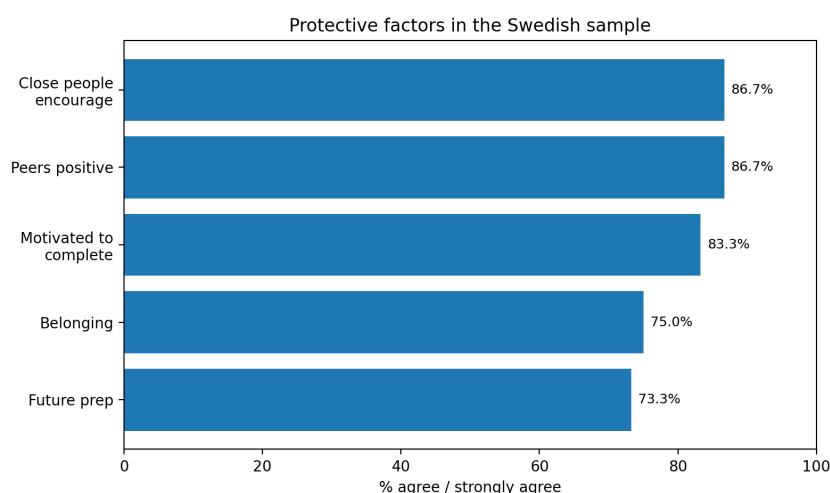


Figure 7: protective factors in the Swedish sample

The clearest pressure signal in the Swedish data concerns workload. 56.7% of students report feeling stressed or overloaded by schoolwork and 46.7% say the same about homework. These are substantial proportions and indicate that academic pressure is one of the main risk factors in the Swedish sample. At the same time, many respondents chose the neutral option, especially for schoolwork (33.3%) and homework (31.7%), which suggests uneven experiences rather than a uniform stress pattern across all students. In practical terms, the data points toward a school environment in which many students remain motivated but still experience the pace, volume, and rhythm of assessment as burdensome.

Protective factors are also clearly visible (Figure 8). A very high 86.7% of respondents say peer relationships make their school experience positive, and 75.0% feel that they belong to their school community. Encouragement from close people outside school is equally strong, with 86.7% agreeing that family, guardians or friends encourage them to stay in school and complete their studies. Perceptions of school-based support are more mixed but still broadly positive. 56.7% agree that teachers are supportive and approachable, while a large neutral share (38.3%) suggests that many students see this support as present but not consistently strong. Knowing where to go for help is more secure for academic challenges (68.3%) than for personal challenges (58.3%), which may indicate that academic support structures are clearer to students than personal or emotional support pathways.

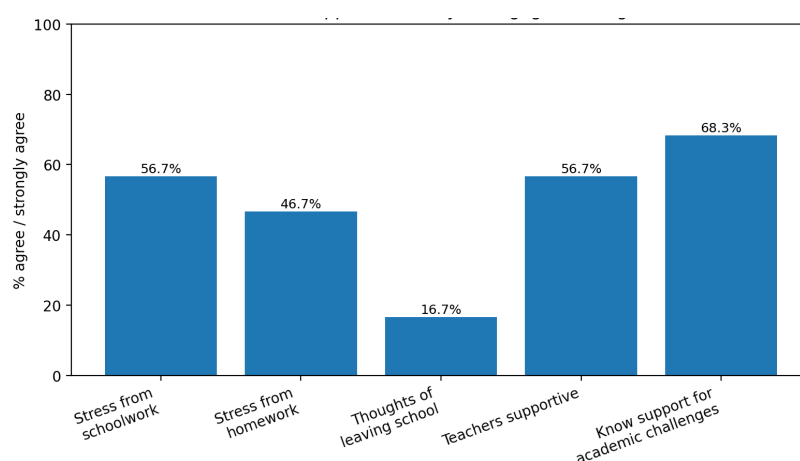


Figure 8: Pressure, support and early disengagement signals

The Swedish profile is positive overall, but it does contain early warning signs. 16.7% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they sometimes think about leaving school before completing their programme. Although this is a minority, it is still important in a retention-focused project because such

thoughts often appear before actual withdrawal. At the same time, 71.7% disagree with that statement, including 40.0% who strongly disagree, which suggests that disengagement is not widespread across the sample. The more likely risk pattern in Sweden is therefore not general rejection of school, but a narrower combination of stress, overload, loss of focus, and uncertainty affecting a smaller segment of students.

The open-ended responses reinforce the quantitative picture (Figure 9). When asked about the biggest challenge to staying interested and motivated, students most often referred to concentration and energy, workload and deadlines, classroom or peer distractions, and difficulties understanding some subjects. Several responses mentioned too many tests in the same week, long school days, tiredness, sleepiness, mobile-phone distraction, or lessons that felt boring or insufficiently adapted to students' needs. When asked what schools could do to make students feel more supported, the most common suggestions were to reduce pressure around tests and deadlines, communicate more with students, offer more individual check-ins, provide clearer explanations or extra help, and create more engaging or varied activities. Taken together, the open responses suggest that students are not primarily asking for less school in general; rather, they are asking for a better-organised, more human, and more responsive school experience.

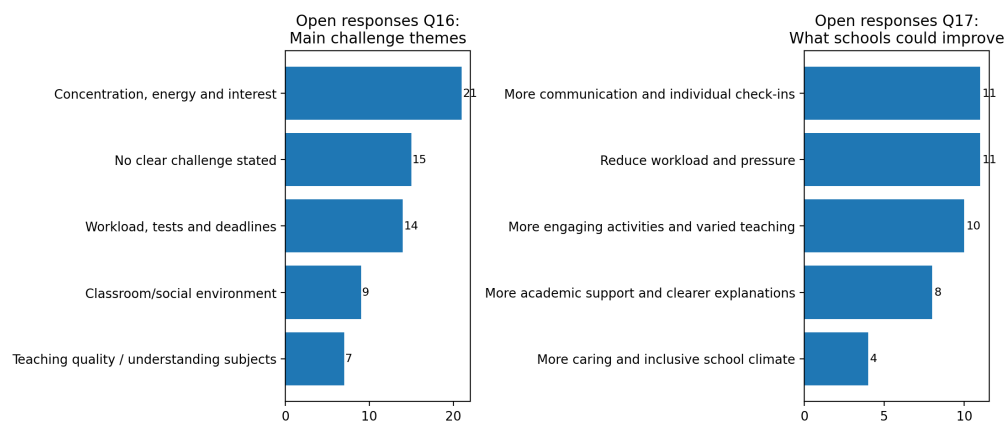


Figure 9: Open-ended responses - Quantitative picture

The correlation analysis (figure 10) identifies stress as the dominant factor associated with early school leaving risk ($r = 0.45$). Compared with the Danish dataset, this relationship is stronger, indicating that stress plays a particularly prominent role in shaping students' perceptions of educational persistence in the Swedish sample. In contrast, several factors show negative correlations with early school leaving risk, indicating potential protective effects. These include engagement ($r = -0.27$), belonging ($r = -0.23$), school support ($r = -0.16$), and social support ($r = -0.06$). Although the magnitude of these correlations varies, the overall pattern suggests that students who experience higher levels of engagement, feel a stronger sense of belonging, and perceive greater support from both the school and their social environment are less likely to consider leaving education.

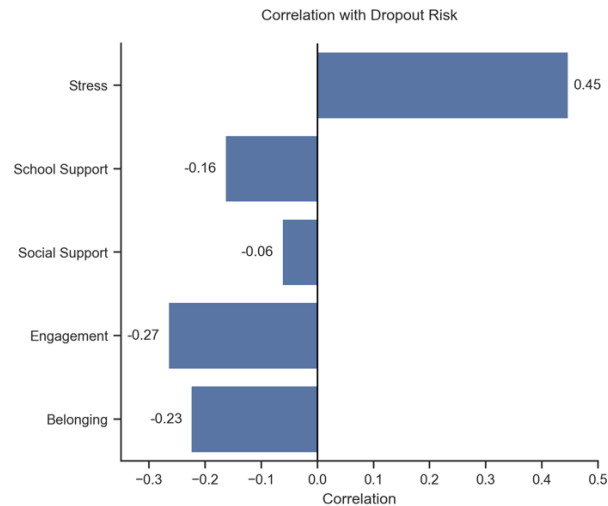


Figure 10. Correlation between student experience factors and early school leaving risk. Stress shows a positive correlation with early school leaving risk ($r = 0.45$), while engagement (-0.27), belonging (-0.23), school support (-0.16), and social support (-0.06) show negative correlations, indicating potential protective factors against early school leaving.

Differences between risk groups

The comparison between low-risk and high-risk students (Figure 11) further highlights these dynamics. Students classified as high-risk report significantly higher stress levels, while students in the low-risk group report higher engagement, belonging, and school support. Interestingly, the difference in social support between the two groups is relatively small, suggesting that peer and family relationships may be less decisive in determining early school leaving risk within this dataset compared with school-based experiences.

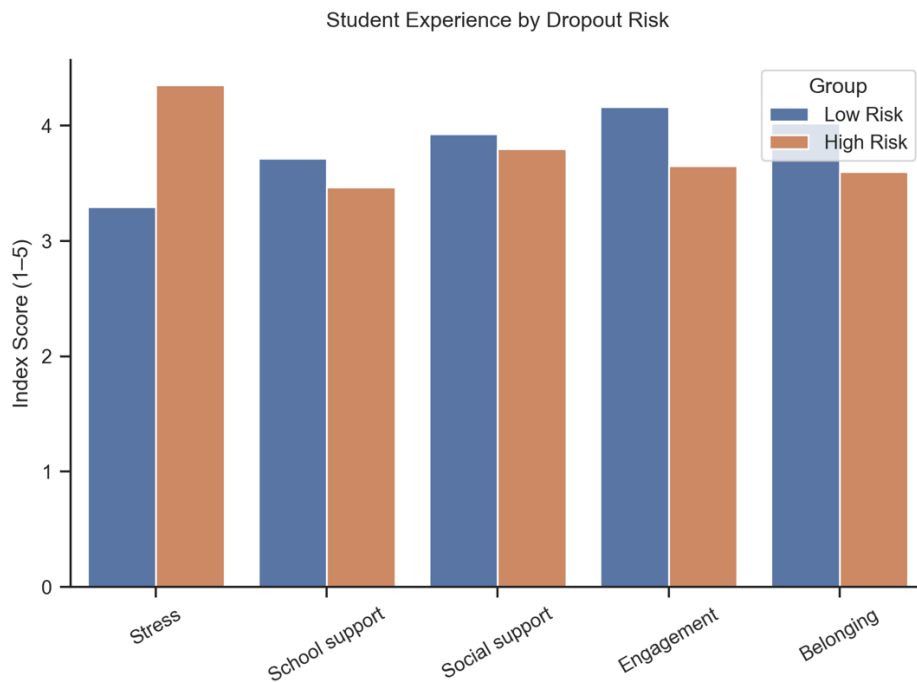


Figure 11. Student experience by early school leaving risk group. High-risk students report higher stress, while low-risk students report higher engagement, belonging, and school support. Differences in social support are smaller.

The stress category analysis (Figure 12) reveals a particularly sharp transition between stress levels. Students reporting medium stress show a early school leaving risk of approximately 3%, while those reporting high stress show a risk of 39%. No early school leaving cases are observed among students reporting low stress. This distribution suggests that stress may function as a tipping point, where high stress levels dramatically increase vulnerability. While these results should be interpreted cautiously due to the limited number of observations, it still suggests that lower stress levels may be associated with a more stable educational experience.

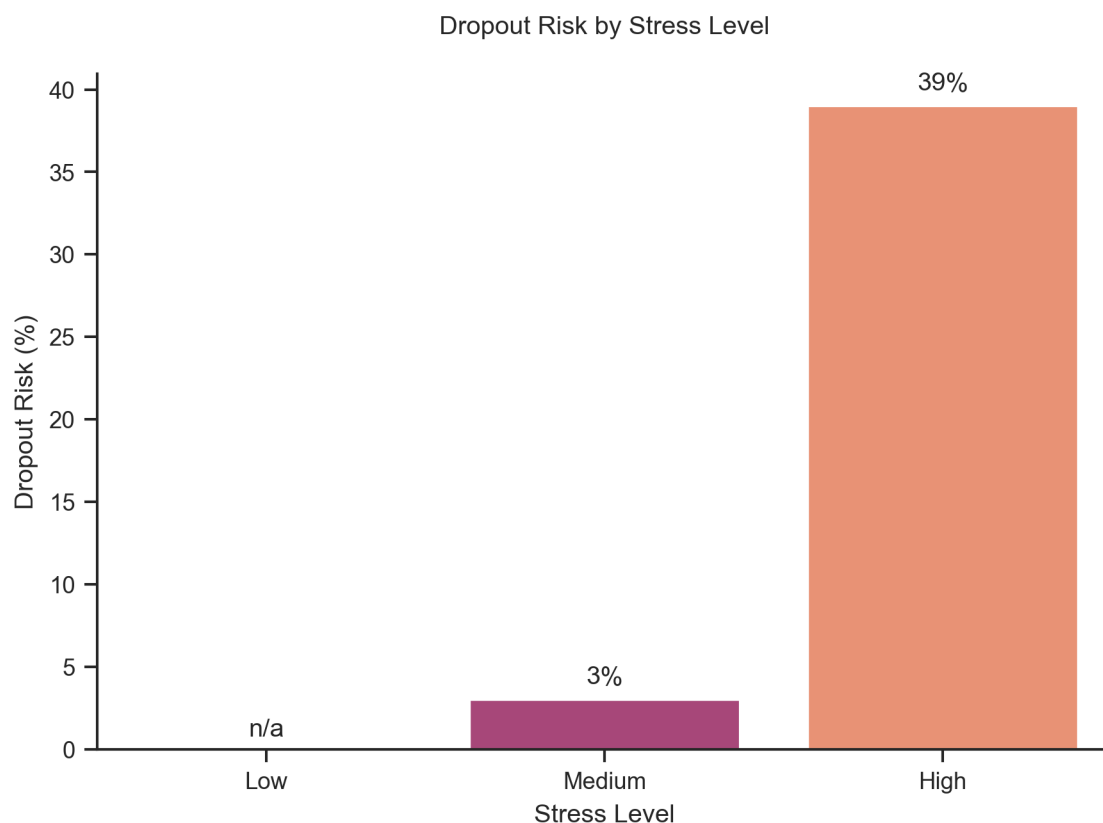


Figure 12. Early school leaving risk by stress level. Early school leaving risk increases markedly with higher stress levels, rising from 3% among students with medium stress to 39% among those reporting high stress. No early school leaving cases were observed among students with low stress levels (n/a).

When the Swedish results are placed next to the other project countries, Sweden stands out positively on motivation, belonging and peer relations. The Swedish sample reports markedly lower agreement with thoughts of leaving school than Denmark and sits close to Finland on several positive indicators. At the same time, stress related to schoolwork is comparatively high, closer to Finland than to Denmark. This means that Sweden does not appear to face a major motivation crisis in the participating context, but it does face a workload-management challenge. For retention work, this is an important distinction: interventions in Sweden may be more effective when they focus on pacing, support, guidance, and meaningful engagement rather than on motivation alone.

The perspectives provided by educators through the educators' project questionnaire and interviews complement and reinforce the student findings. Teachers consistently identify workload, stress, and difficulties in maintaining concentration as central challenges affecting student engagement. Many educators observe that students often struggle to manage overlapping assignments, tight deadlines, and

sustained academic demands, which can lead to fatigue, reduced motivation, and, in some cases, withdrawal from active participation in learning.

In addition to academic pressure, educators highlight the importance of individual differences in learning pace, needs, and well-being, noting that standardised teaching approaches may not sufficiently support all students. A recurring theme in the responses is the need for more personalised support, including differentiated instruction, individual follow-ups, and closer monitoring of students showing early signs of disengagement.

Educators also emphasise the role of student–teacher relationships and communication. Establishing trust, maintaining regular dialogue, and creating safe spaces for students to express difficulties are seen as essential elements for preventing disengagement. Several responses point to the importance of early identification mechanisms, where attendance patterns, behavioural changes, or declining performance can trigger timely and supportive interventions.

Finally, teachers underline that improving retention is not only about reducing academic pressure, but also about making learning more meaningful and engaging. Suggestions include more varied and interactive teaching methods, clearer connections between school subjects and real-life applications, and stronger guidance to help students understand future pathways.

Overall, the educator feedback aligns closely with the student perspective: while motivation and engagement remain relatively strong in the Swedish context, stress, workload management, and the need for more responsive and individualised support represent the key areas where targeted interventions can further strengthen student retention.

3.4 Country analysis, Finland

The Finland sample is concentrated in upper secondary education ages: 51.8% of respondents are 17 years old, 46.4% are 16, and one respondent is 18 (Figure 13). Three out of every four respondents (75.0%) report that they do not have a part-time job, while 25.0% do (Figure 14). This means the responses mainly reflect students whose core daily load is school, although a meaningful minority are also balancing school with employment or other commitments.

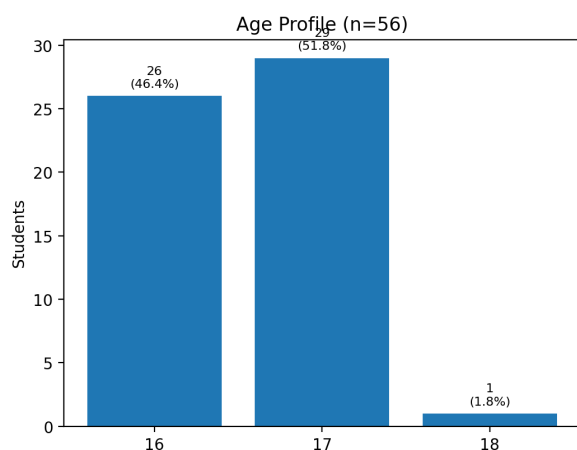


Figure 13: Age profile

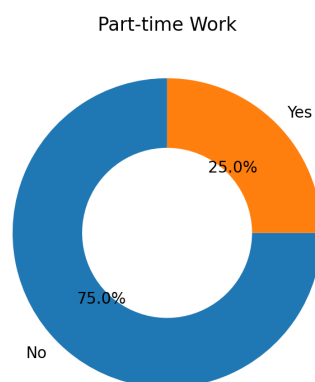


Figure 14: part-time work

The strongest message from the Finland data is that students are not broadly disconnected from education. On the contrary, 83.9% agree or strongly agree that they feel motivated to complete their education, and 80.4% believe their education is preparing them well for the future. Only one respondent disagreed with the motivation statement. This suggests that the Finnish participants generally see continuing in school as worthwhile, even when they experience pressure or fatigue. This high level of motivation should not be seen only as an individual trait, but also as a result of strong social

expectations, which is also part of the official educational policy, to complete upper secondary education in Finland. In this way, motivation is not just personal but also shaped by institutions and the limited alternatives outside formal education.

Protective relational factors are particularly strong. Fully 85.7% describe their teachers as supportive and approachable, 83.9% say peer relationships make school more positive, and 71.4% feel they belong to their school community. Perceived access to support is also solid: 83.9% know where to go for academic help and 73.2% know where to go for personal challenges. The strongest result in the whole Finland profile concerns close personal encouragement, with 96.4% agreeing that people close to them encourage them to stay in school and finish their studies (Figure 15).

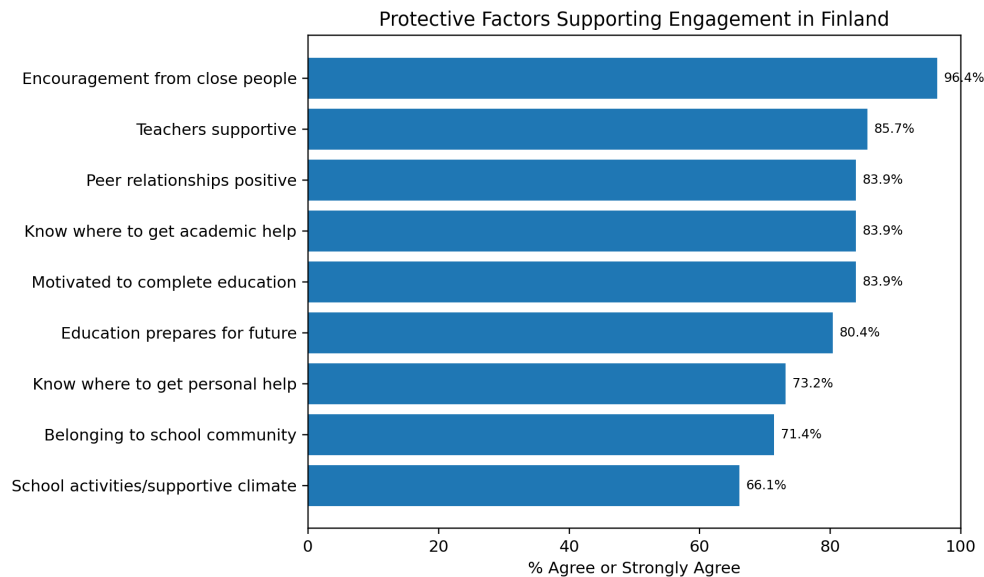


Figure 15. Positive engagement and retention factors in the Finland subsample (% agree/strongly agree).

These positive indicators do not mean that Finland students are free from risk. Schoolwork pressure is the clearest tension in the dataset: 58.9% report feeling stressed or overloaded by schoolwork. Homework produces a more divided picture, with equal shares agreeing and disagreeing (both 41.1%) and 17.9% remaining neutral. This pattern suggests that workload concerns are real, but that pressure may be unevenly distributed across students, periods, subjects or assessment moments.

Question 11, which asks whether students sometimes think about leaving school before completing their programme, offers an important retention signal. In Finland, 14.3% agree or strongly agree with this statement, while 75.0% disagree or strongly disagree and 5.4% select a neutral position. Three students marked the item as not applicable. The finding does not point to a broad dropout problem in this group, but it does identify a meaningful minority whose engagement appears more fragile (Figure 16). The levels of reported stress can be linked to broader trends such as changing curricula, continuous assessment, and performance monitoring, which make students' daily lives feel like ongoing evaluated work. From this perspective, stress is not incidental but reflects increasing educational demands that mirror changes in working life, where flexibility, self-management, and constant productivity are expected. As a result, students are often left to cope individually with pressures that are largely structural.

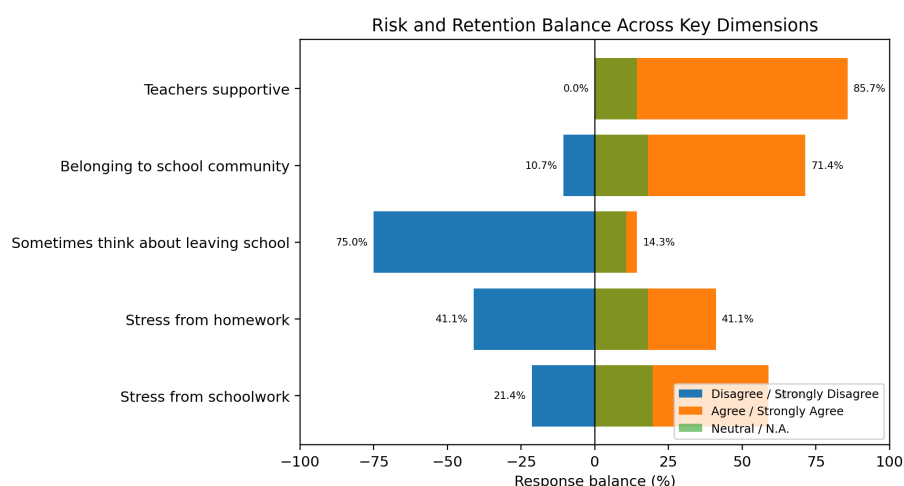


Figure 16. Response balance on selected risk and retention dimensions in Finland.

Unlike the Danish and Swedish datasets, where stress appears as the most prominent factor, the Finnish dataset shows a different structure. The strongest relationship with early school leaving risk is observed for engagement ($r = -0.54$), as shown in Figure 17.

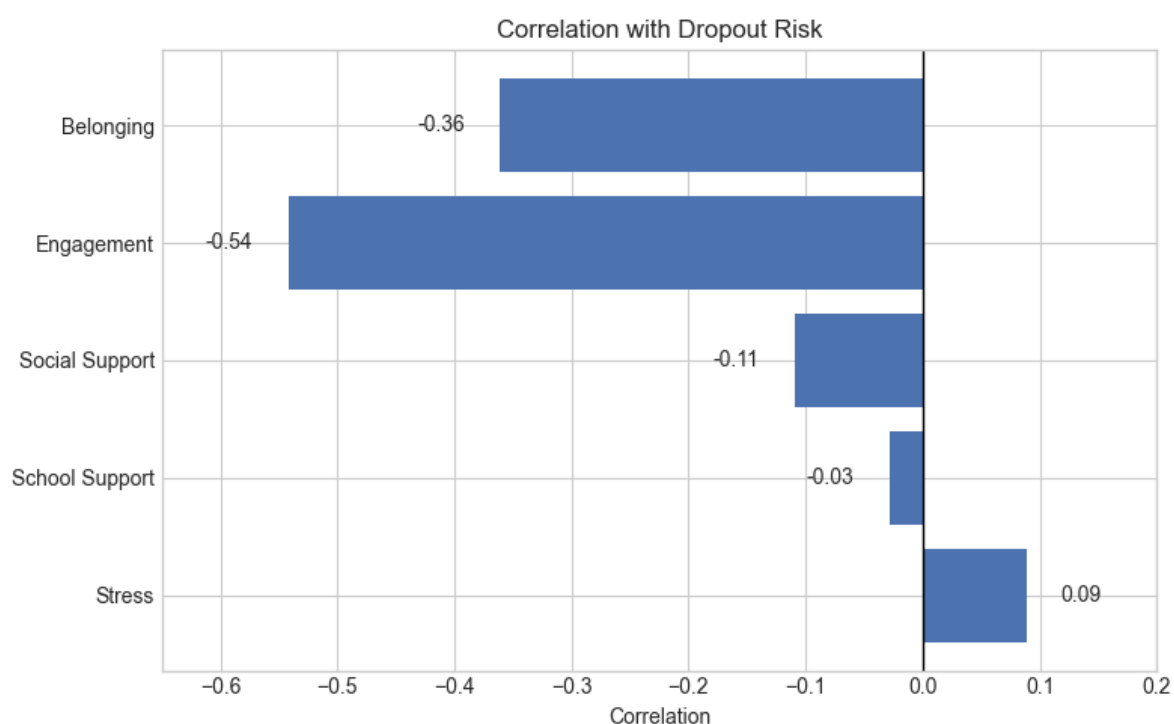


Figure 17. Correlation between student experience factors and early school leaving risk ($n = 56$). Engagement ($r = -0.54$) and belonging ($r = -0.36$) show the strongest negative relationship with early school leaving risk, while stress shows a small positive correlation.

This strong negative correlation suggests that engagement plays a central stabilizing role within the Finnish dataset, with higher levels of engagement corresponding to a substantially lower probability of students reporting early school leaving risk. A similar pattern appears for belonging ($r = -0.36$),

indicating that students who feel socially integrated within the school environment are less likely to consider leaving education. Although engagement is strongly linked to lower dropout risk, it should not be seen only as an individual responsibility. Engagement is shaped by material and social conditions, such as manageable workloads, stable peer groups, timely feedback, and a sense of recognition at school. Lower engagement may therefore reflect not a lack of motivation, but a reduced capacity to meet ongoing demands. From this perspective, dropout risk could be viewed less as personal failure and more as strained participation in a demanding system.

The results shown in Figure 18 indicate a clear relationship between student engagement and early school leaving risk. Students reporting low engagement display the highest early school leaving risk (100%), while the risk decreases substantially among students with medium engagement (36%) and is lowest among those with high engagement (7%). This pattern suggests that engagement may act as an important protective factor against early school leaving. Students who feel more involved in their learning activities and school environment appear significantly less likely to fall into the high-risk category.

However, the results for the low engagement group should be interpreted with caution, as they are based on a very small number of responses. Small subgroup sizes can lead to inflated percentages and, therefore, limit the generalizability of the result. Despite this limitation, the overall trend observed in the data supports the broader finding of this study that higher engagement is associated with lower risk of early school leaving, highlighting the importance of fostering active participation and involvement in the educational environment. It should also be noted that in the Finnish system municipalities and other educational authorities, along with teachers, enjoy a high level of autonomy in how resources are allocated and the education organized, which means that the results could vary significantly between schools.

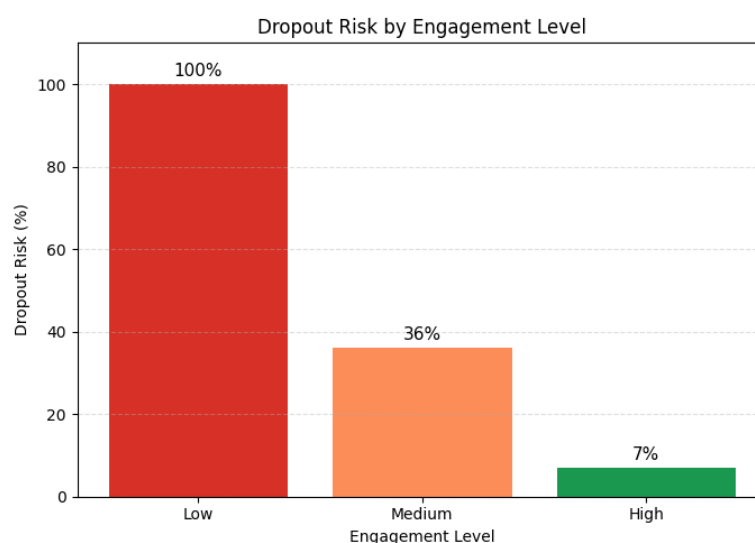


Figure 18. Early school leaving risk by engagement level. Students with low engagement show the highest dropout risk (100%), while early school leaving risk decreases substantially with higher engagement levels (36% for medium and 7% for high engagement). For the low engagement level, results should be interpreted with caution due to small subgroup sizes.

Taken together, the Finland results show a school experience that is broadly anchored by strong supports rather than dominated by alienation. Students report high levels of motivation, strong confidence in teachers, and substantial support from peers and close family networks. This is important because it suggests that retention in the Finnish subsample is supported by both institutional and relational protective factors.

The main challenge is therefore not lack of support in the abstract; it is the accumulation of pressure. When more than half of respondents feel overloaded by schoolwork, even a generally positive learning climate can become vulnerable during intense periods such as exam weeks, project deadlines or transitions to high-stakes assessments. From a retention perspective, this matters because disengagement does not always begin with rejection of school. It can also begin with exhaustion, overload and reduced capacity to cope.

Compared with the other participating countries in this project baseline, Finland presents one of the strongest overall engagement profiles (Figures 19 and 20). Motivation to complete education in Finland (83.9%) is almost identical to Sweden (83.3%) and far above Denmark (66.2%). Teacher support is markedly stronger in Finland (85.7%) than in Sweden (56.7%) or Denmark (55.8%). At the same time, Finland records the lowest share of students reporting thoughts of leaving school (14.3%), slightly below Sweden (16.7%) and far below Denmark (45.5%).

However, Finland is not the least pressured context in the project dataset. The share reporting stress from schoolwork (58.9%) is slightly higher than Sweden (56.7%) and clearly above Denmark (40.3%). This combination is analytically important: Finland appears to combine high academic pressure with strong relational and institutional support. In other words, the Finland pattern suggests that pressure alone does not automatically produce disengagement when students also feel guided, supported and encouraged.

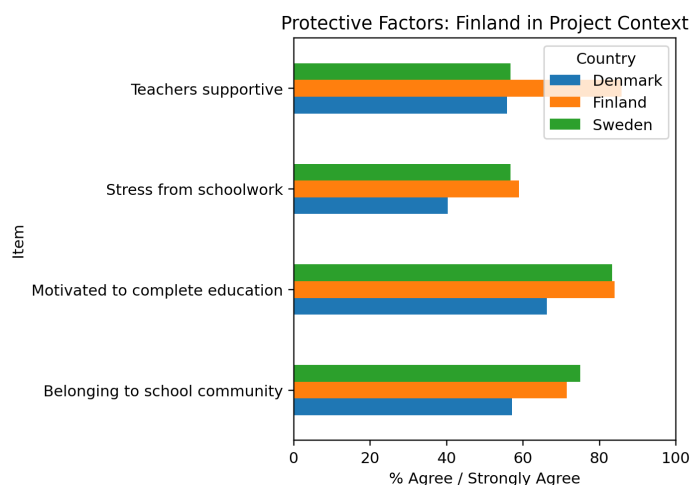


Figure 19: Protective factors: Finland in the project context

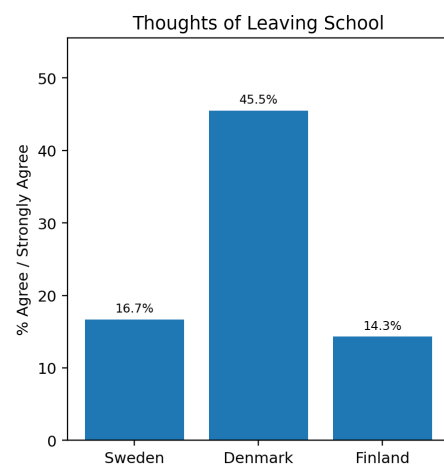


Figure 20: thoughts of leaving school

The Finland findings offer a useful example of a context in which student retention is supported by strong protective relationships, but where preventive work still matters because pressure and fatigue remain significant. The most relevant lesson is that retention strategies should not focus only on students already at the point of withdrawal. They should also address the everyday conditions that make it harder for students to sustain engagement over time.

In practical terms, the Finland responses point towards four priorities. First, schools should continue investing in supportive teacher-student relationships, because this is one of the clearest strengths in the dataset. Second, workload coordination and assessment rhythm deserve attention, particularly around test-heavy periods. Third, the perceived relevance of learning matters: when students struggle to see why some content is useful, motivation becomes more fragile. Finally, even in a relatively well-supported setting, individualised academic and emotional support remains important, especially for the minority who report thoughts of leaving school or difficulties coping with pressure.

Overall, the Finland baseline suggests that the participating schools are starting from a comparatively strong foundation. The challenge is therefore less about rebuilding belonging from scratch and more about protecting motivation under pressure. This is a valuable insight for the broader Engaging Minds partnership because it highlights how early school leaving prevention can also mean reducing overload, improving relevance and sustaining student energy before disengagement takes hold.

The perspectives provided by educators further enrich the understanding of student engagement and retention in the Finnish context. Teachers describe disengagement as a gradual and cumulative process, often linked to a mismatch between students' expectations and the academic demands of upper secondary education. Students may overestimate their ability to manage workload and time, leading to stress, reduced performance, and eventually disengagement. In addition, mental and physical health challenges, as well as difficulties in daily routines, such as sleep patterns, are identified as important contributing factors.

Educators consistently highlight early warning signs such as increasing and irregular absenteeism, lack of communication, reduced participation, and visible social isolation. In particular, loneliness and the absence of group belonging, especially when group formation is weak at the beginning of the school year, are seen as critical risk factors that can be difficult to reverse over time.

A key strength of the Finnish system lies in its structured and comprehensive support mechanisms. Educators emphasise the importance of systematic follow-up of absences, regular one-to-one discussions, strong collaboration among staff, and the availability of special education and small-group support. The presence of multidisciplinary teams, including counsellors, psychologists, and social workers, further supports a holistic approach to student well-being and retention. It is notable that many support measures are introduced only after problems become visible, treating stress and disengagement mainly as individual issues to be addressed through targeted interventions. While these supports are important, they largely operate within existing structures. This raises the question of whether they compensate for demanding conditions, rather than addressing the overall intensity of upper secondary education itself.

At the same time, teachers underline that time constraints and organisational factors can limit the effectiveness of these support systems. High levels of student autonomy in scheduling and a wide range of elective choices may reduce opportunities for stable peer group formation, while coordination challenges between educational and social services can affect continuity of support.

Across interviews, the importance of relationships and everyday interactions is strongly emphasised. Small actions, such as regular check-ins, showing genuine interest in students' well-being, and ensuring that no student feels isolated, are seen as central to maintaining engagement. Educators also highlight the role of peer support and mentoring, as well as the importance of creating inclusive classroom environments that promote respect, cooperation, and a sense of community.

Finally, motivation is closely linked to students' sense of competence, autonomy, and belonging. When students experience success, receive appropriate guidance, and can progress at their own pace towards meaningful goals, they are more likely to remain engaged. Overall, the Finnish context demonstrates a strong systemic foundation for student support, while highlighting the need to further strengthen early intervention, individualised support, and social integration mechanisms to prevent gradual disengagement. The Finnish findings suggest that strong relational support helps ease pressures in an academically intensive, performance-oriented system. From a broader perspective, preventing dropout may require not only strengthening individual resilience, but also examining how much strain students face. In this sense, supporting retention is not just a pedagogical task, but also a question of how education shapes expectations about endurance and success.

3.5 Country analysis, Ireland

The Engaging Minds student survey provides insight into the experience of students on motivation, wellbeing, support, and engagement with the school environment. 12 students participated in the Irish version of the student survey, with the majority of students aged 16-17 years (Figure 21), which is the typical age for students to be in 4th year of secondary education. In Ireland, this is commonly known as Transition Year. This means students who completed the survey have likely completed the Junior

Cert examination in the 2024/2025 school year and are now enjoying a year with less academic expectation and more opportunity to explore interests through non-academic experiences.

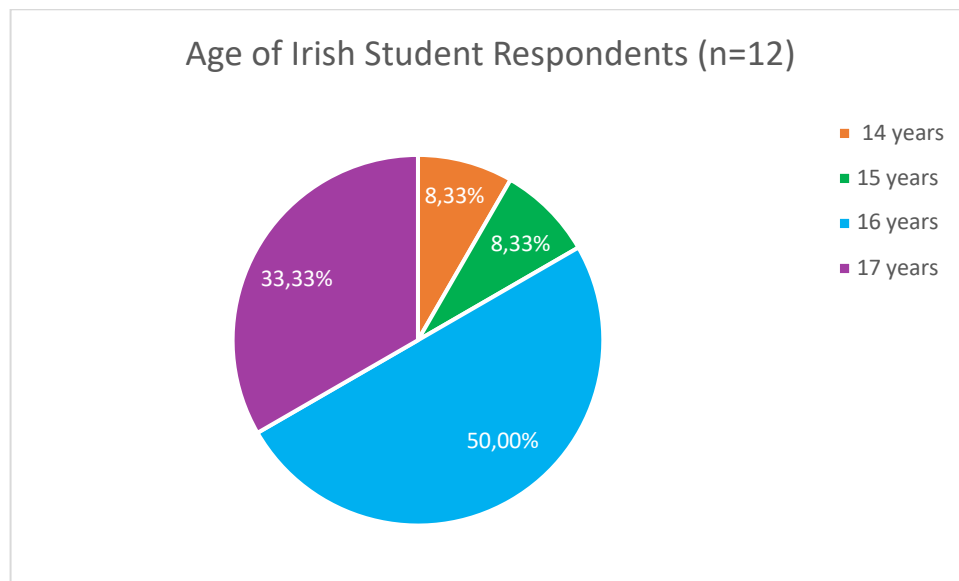


Figure 21: Age profile of Irish Student Survey Participants

Student Motivation and Educational Aspirations

Overall, students reported high levels of motivation to complete their education ($M = 4.00$), and strong confidence that their schooling prepares them for the future ($M = 4.00$) (Figure 22 and 23).

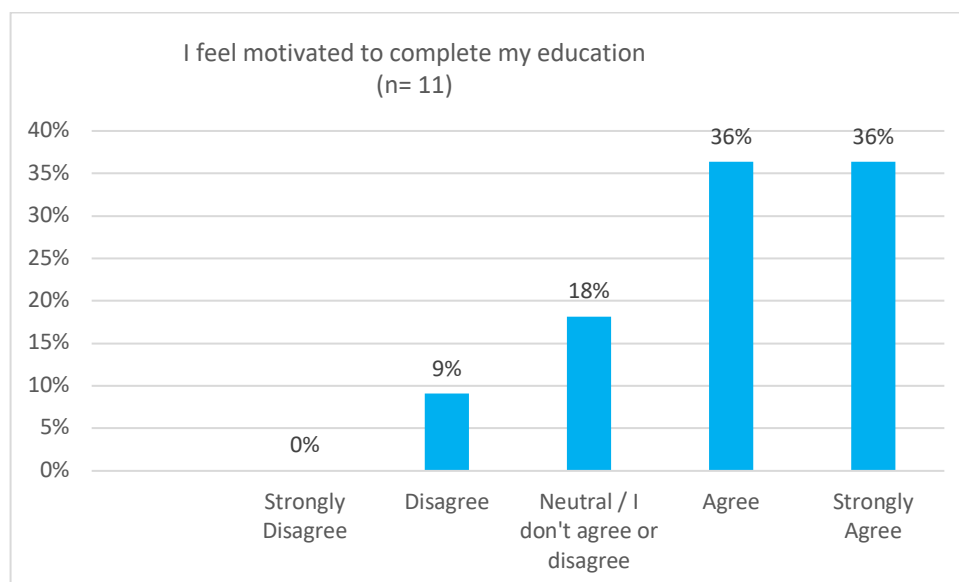


Figure 22: Levels of motivation to complete their education

² M = Mean

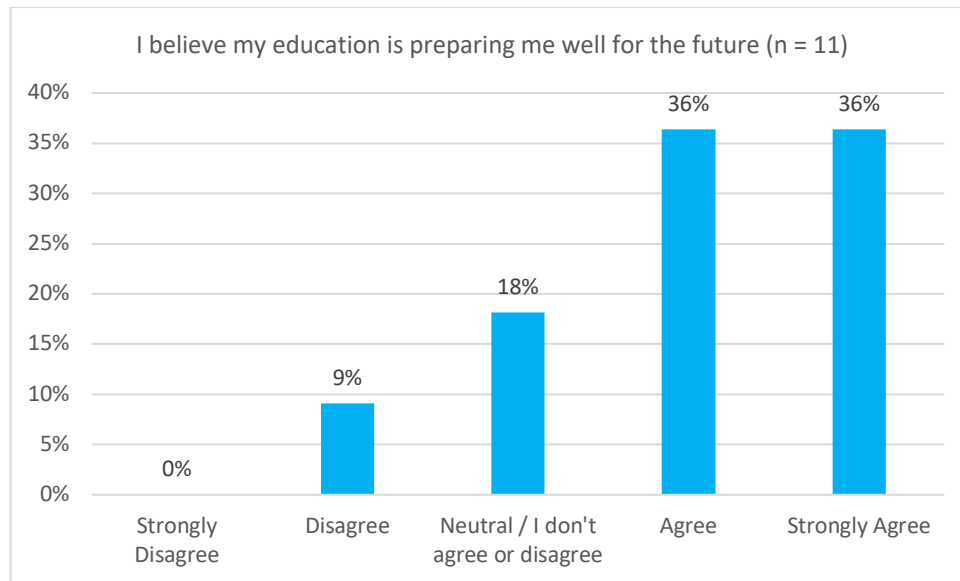


Figure 23: Levels of student confidence education prepares them for the future

In addition, the majority of respondents indicated that they rarely consider leaving school early ($M = 1.73$). This suggests low levels of disengagement with school and indicates no student who participated is at an increased risk of early school leaving (Figure 24).

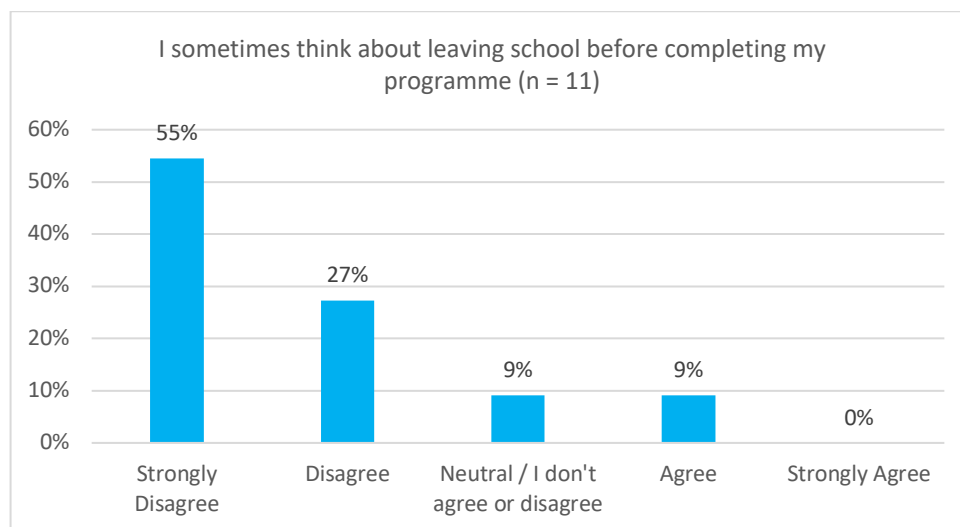


Figure 24: Student risk of leaving school before completing their program

These findings indicate that this cohort of students is committed to completing their education and see the benefits of that for their future. External sources of encouragement seem to play an important role in this, with strong positive responses in relation to the importance of peer and family support to continue on their school journey and complete it ($M = 4.50$) (Figure 25).

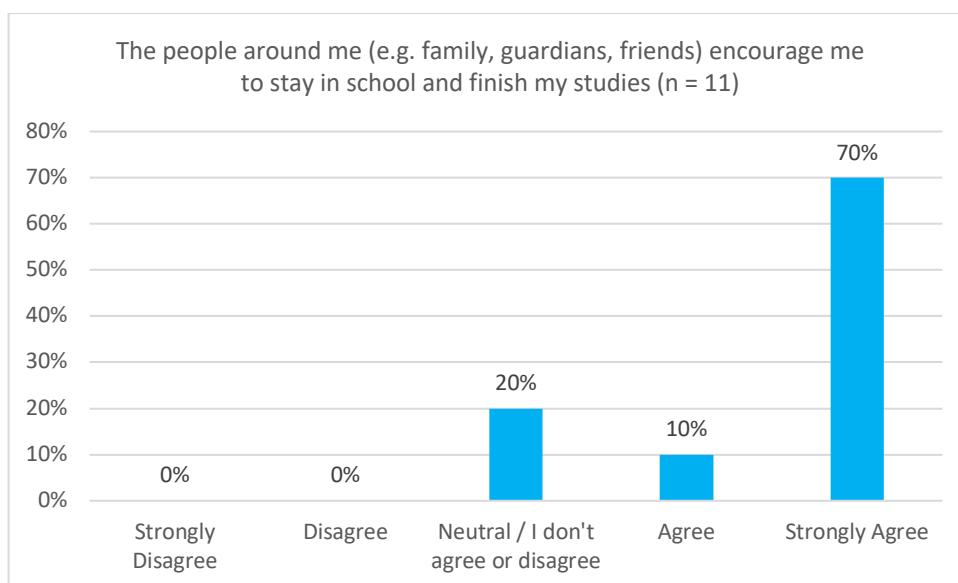


Figure 25: Student evaluation of the impact of family support on continued school engagement

Stress and Academic Pressure

Even though motivation to participate in education is generally high with this group of students, they did report levels of stress related to schoolwork ($M = 3.82$). The open-ended question responses reinforce this finding with students highlighting experiencing challenges with workload, feeling tired and pressures related to exams, particularly in relation to the preparation for state examination (the Leaving Cert) (Figure 26).

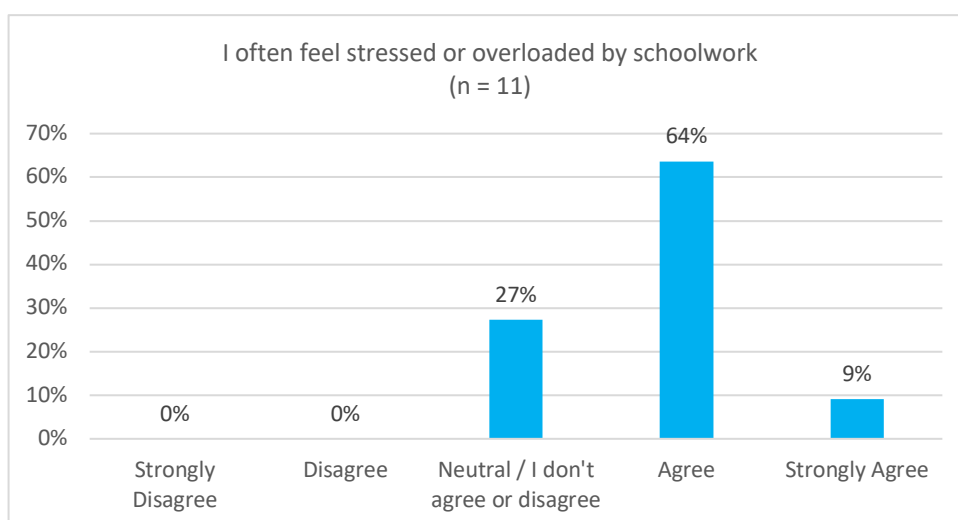


Figure 26: Student reported levels of stress due to schoolwork

This suggests that the school environment can be experienced as high pressure, especially in relation to academic performance. While students are committed to complete their secondary school program, they may experience stress and difficulty in maintaining their wellbeing. The combination of high motivation and high stress may have implications for the ability to engage with schooling long-term and mental health.

Support and Help

Students reported moderately positive perceptions of teacher support and approachability ($M = 3.55$). Awareness of where to look for help with personal challenges was also relatively high ($M = 3.64$). In contrast, knowledge of where to look for support with academic questions or challenges was a little lower ($M = 3.36$). This might indicate a potential gap in understanding and clarity with students of where and how to access structures and supports for academic help (Figure 27 and Figure 28).

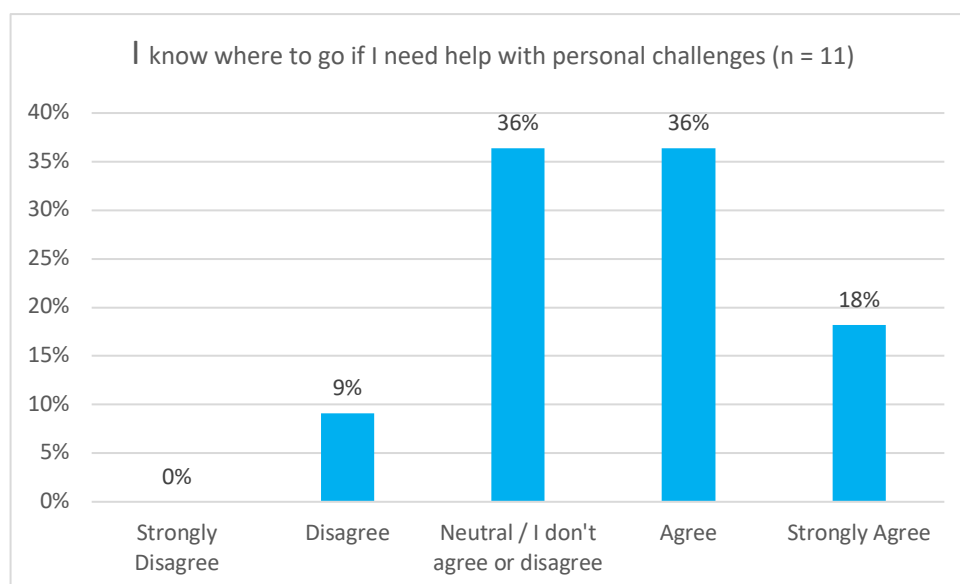


Figure 27: Student confidence in finding help with personal challenges

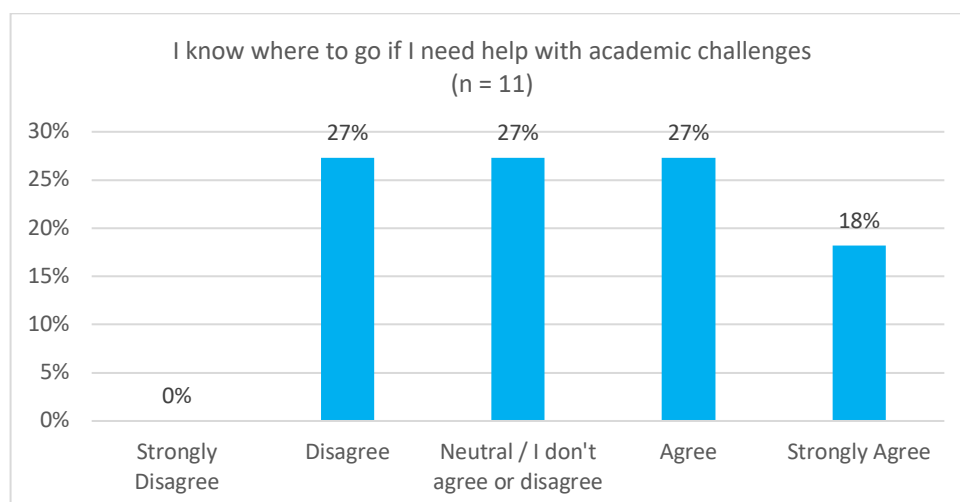


Figure 28: Student confidence in finding help with academic challenges

This is also confirmed in the qualitative data, which suggests that students could benefit from improved visibility of support services. Increased opportunities to engage with support services in the school, like guidance counsellors for example. Some of the open-ended responses also point to a desire for more psychologically safe classrooms, so students are more comfortable asking questions without feeling any anxiety or negative emotion.

Belonging and Peer Relationships

Students generally reported a strong sense of belonging with their school and school community ($M = 3.73$) and peers ($M = 4.00$). These results highlight the importance of feeling connected to school at a social and community level. This social connectedness can serve as a protective factor in the school experience (Figure 29 and Figure 30).

Peer relationships seem to contribute significantly to students' overall wellbeing and positive engagement. Therefore interventions focused on further improving social connection and cohesion might be effective.

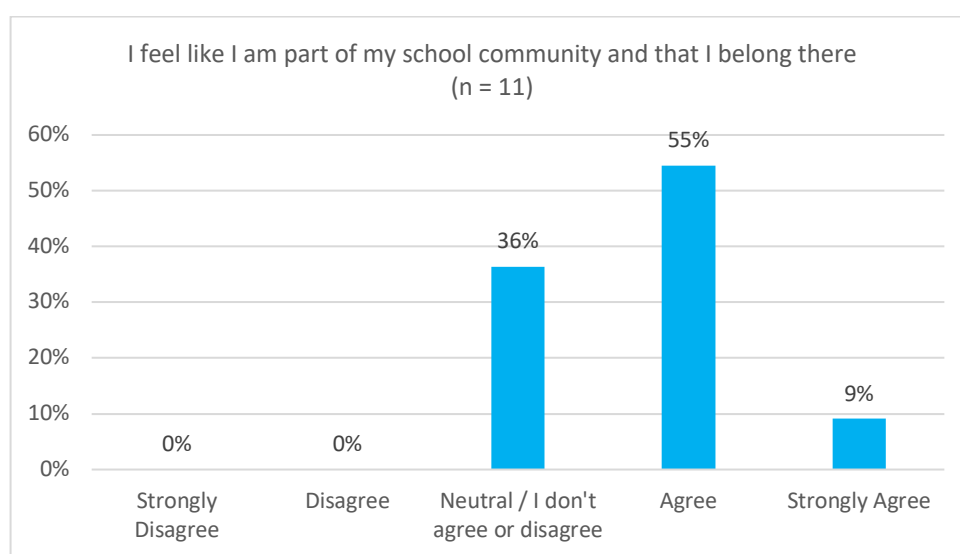


Figure 29: Student reported sense of belonging in school community

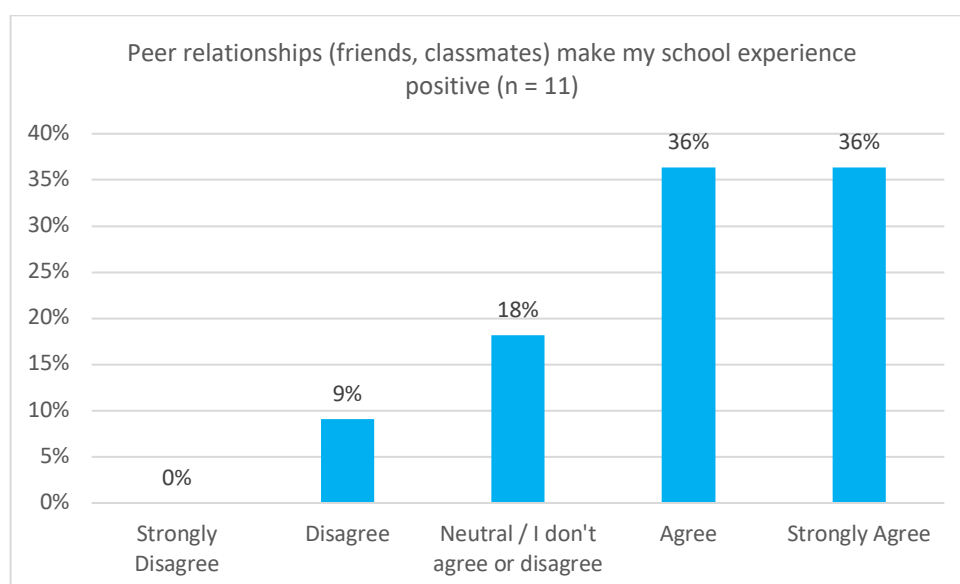


Figure 30: Student evaluation of the importance of positive peer relationships in school

Engagement and Classroom Experience

A key theme from the open-ended responses relate to student engagement in the classroom. Students described lessons as 'boring', or over-reliant on passive teaching methods like note taking or reading

from slides. Other responses indicated students might find it difficult to concentrate in the classroom, especially when classroom dynamics or seating arrangements are uncomfortable.

This could potentially point to a mismatch between student motivation to succeed and their day-to-day learning experiences. While students seem to value their education, they may not always find the classroom environment stimulating or interactive.

School Environment and Wellbeing Supports

Students reported moderately positive perceptions of school initiatives that are meant to promote wellbeing ($M = 3.50$) (Figure 31).

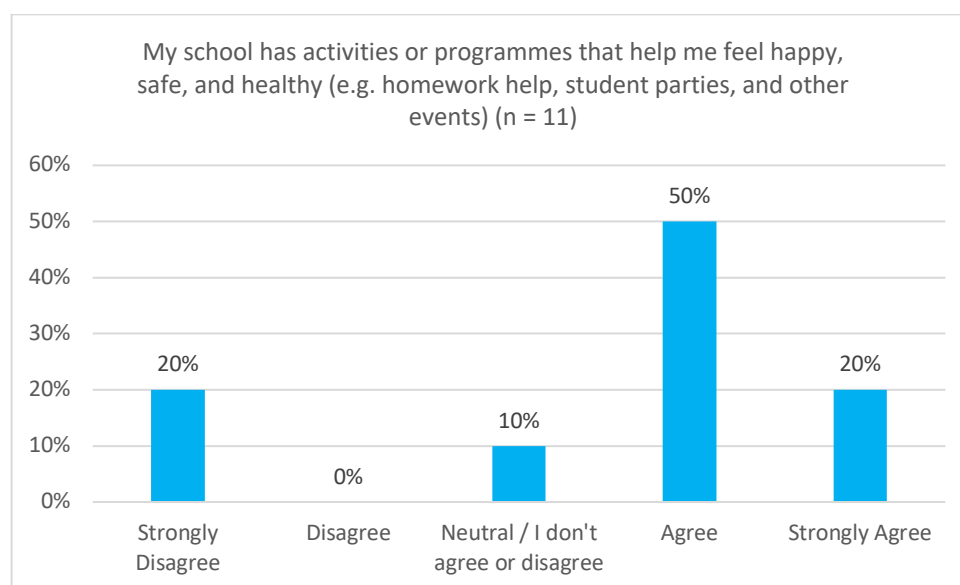


Figure 31: Student evaluation of student wellbeing programme impact on wellbeing

The open responses suggest there is room for improvement, particularly in reducing perceived pressure, by improving communication around support services, offering anonymous platforms for asking questions, and fostering more supportive teacher-student relationships (Figure 32).

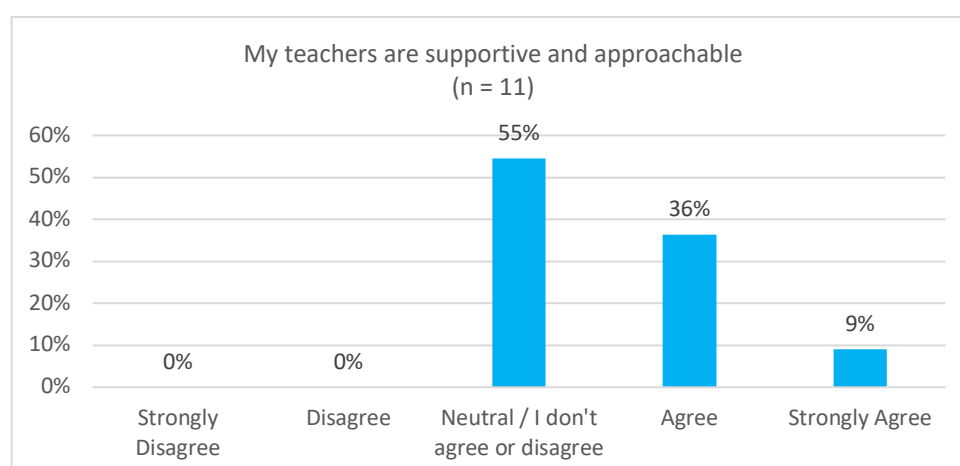


Figure 32: Student perception of teacher approachability

Overall, the findings point to a generally positive but nuanced picture of student experience. Students appear motivated, future-oriented, and supported by strong peer relationships and existing school

structures. At the same time, the data highlight areas that deserve attention, particularly the pressure associated with academic demands and a degree of disengagement linked to current teaching practices. While support systems are perceived as effective, there is a clear indication that they could be more inclusive, especially for students who do not fall at either end of the performance spectrum.

Although the small sample size ($n = 12$) requires cautious interpretation, the consistency between quantitative and qualitative insights strengthens the relevance of these observations. Overall, the results suggest that the fundamental conditions for student success are in place, but targeted improvements, such as reducing academic pressure, enhancing engagement in the classroom, and refining support mechanisms, could further strengthen students' learning experience and well-being.

The Irish focus group with school support staff provides a detailed account of how educators experience and interpret student disengagement in practice. Participants described disengagement not as a single issue, but as a gradual process shaped by the interaction between home environments, individual student needs, school structures, and broader systemic conditions. From the educators' perspective, many of the initial challenges emerge outside the school, including socio-economic pressures, expectations to contribute financially, and family contexts where education is not strongly prioritised, often linked to intergenerational experiences of early school leaving. These factors are further compounded for some students by cultural expectations, interrupted schooling, or late entry into the Irish education system, which can lead to significant literacy gaps and reduced confidence. Within the school context, participants highlighted a perceived mismatch between students' needs and the structure of the Junior Cycle curriculum, which is experienced as academically demanding and assessment-driven, with repeated failure contributing to loss of confidence and withdrawal from learning. In addition, the structure of the school day and classroom environment was described as difficult for some students, particularly those with attention or behavioural challenges.

Educators also emphasised the role of unmet or unidentified needs, including learning difficulties and mental health challenges, noting that delays in accessing assessments and supports often mean that students enter post-primary education without appropriate interventions in place. Alongside these longer-term factors, more recent developments were highlighted, including increased school refusal following COVID-19, often linked to anxiety, as well as the influence of smartphone use and difficulties in maintaining attendance. In terms of identification, declining attendance was consistently described as the most reliable early warning sign, often accompanied by reduced parental engagement and changes in student behaviour, which are frequently understood as expressions of distress rather than deliberate disruption. While schools rely on information from feeder primary schools and ongoing monitoring to identify risks early, this process is sometimes limited by delays in diagnosis or incomplete information sharing.

At the same time, the focus group highlighted a range of practices that support student engagement, with a strong emphasis on relationships. Having at least one trusted adult within the school, regular check-ins, and sustained relationship-building were seen as central to maintaining connection with students. Educators also described efforts to build trust with families through informal and community-based approaches, which were considered more effective than formal interactions alone. For students who have already disengaged, flexible and gradual reintegration strategies, including reduced timetables and student-led approaches, were used to support re-entry into school. Alternative pathways, such as Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Applied programmes, were also identified as important options for students who struggle within more traditional academic structures. However, despite these efforts, educators pointed to persistent structural constraints, including limited access to psychological and educational assessments, a lack of long-term alternative provision, challenges faced by families in navigating the education system, and restricted staff time and resources, all of which limit the consistency and scale of support that schools can provide.

3.6 Comparative analysis

The baseline data presents a generally encouraging but not risk-free picture. Students report strong overall motivation to complete their education, high levels of encouragement from family and close social networks, and positive peer relationships. At the same time, the data also reveals a meaningful level of pressure related to schoolwork and homework, as well as a non-negligible share of students who sometimes think about leaving school before completing their programme. In other words, the baseline does not suggest a crisis of disengagement across the whole sample, but it clearly shows the presence of stress-related and motivational vulnerabilities that can undermine retention if left unaddressed.

The strongest protective factors in the dataset are social in nature. Fully 88.1% of respondents report that people close to them encourage them to stay in school and complete their studies, and 79.3% say that peer relationships make their school experience positive. This social dimension is important because it indicates that, for many students, retention is supported not only by individual motivation but also by the quality of relationships inside and outside school. Motivation itself is high, with 76.7% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they feel motivated to complete their education, while 67.4% believe that their education is preparing them well for their future.

However, positive headline indicators coexist with signs of strain. Half of the sample (50.8%) reports often feeling stressed or overloaded by schoolwork, and 46.1% say the same about homework. The school environment appears supportive in several respects, but not uniformly so. While 64.8% perceive their teachers as supportive and approachable, a lower share (57.0%) feels confident about where to go for help with personal challenges. Support with academic challenges is more visible, with 67.4% knowing where to seek help. Meanwhile, 66.8% report a sense of belonging to their school community, but this still leaves a sizeable minority who are neutral or negative on this point.

One of the most important findings for the handbook is the coexistence of strong educational commitment with a visible layer of early school leaving risk. Most students describe themselves as motivated and future-oriented, yet 27.5% agree or strongly agree that they sometimes think about leaving school before completing their programme, while 58.5% disagree or strongly disagree with this statement. This is a significant proportion for a baseline exercise focused on retention. It suggests that early school leaving risk should not be viewed only through the lens of severe disengagement or school refusal; rather, it may also emerge among students who remain enrolled but are struggling with pressure, uncertainty or a weakening connection to the value of their studies.

The relationship between future relevance and retention appears especially important. Students who perceive their education as meaningful and useful for the future are also less likely to express thoughts of leaving school. The same pattern appears for motivation, belonging and peer relationships. In practice, this means that retention is not simply about keeping students in school through external control; it is also about helping students see a credible pathway from present effort to future opportunity, and ensuring that daily school life feels socially and emotionally sustainable.

A basic correlation check within the dataset supports this interpretation. Thoughts of leaving school are most strongly associated with lower motivation to complete education (Spearman $\rho \approx -0.48$), weaker belief that education is preparing students well for the future ($\rho \approx -0.44$), weaker belonging ($\rho \approx -0.39$) and less positive peer relationships ($\rho \approx -0.40$). By contrast, stress from schoolwork ($\rho \approx 0.22$) and homework ($\rho \approx 0.28$) is positively associated with early school leaving thoughts. These patterns do not establish causality, but they do validate the wider project assumption that retention is shaped by a combination of academic pressure, personal meaning and school climate.

Stress and overload emerge as the clearest warning signals in the baseline. The findings suggest that a large share of students are not rejecting school as such; rather, they are struggling with how school is organised and experienced on a day-to-day basis. The strongest pressure point is schoolwork, followed closely by homework. The fact that the neutral category is also large for both questions indicates that pressure is widespread even beyond the group that explicitly agrees it is a problem. In practical terms,

many students appear to live close to a threshold where cumulative workload, clustering of assignments or insufficient time for recovery may begin to undermine motivation.

This reading is strongly reinforced by the open-ended responses. Across countries, students repeatedly mention too many assignments at the same time, frequent tests, long school days, early mornings, lack of time after school and difficulty balancing studies with hobbies, work or personal life. Several students also describe tiredness, stress and burnout directly, while others point to a loss of motivation when schoolwork feels excessive, repetitive or disconnected from their interests. The open data therefore validates the quantitative finding that pressure is not an isolated issue but a recurring feature of students' everyday school experience.

For the handbook, this has an important implication: retention measures should not focus only on crisis intervention once a student is already at risk of leaving. They should also address the cumulative design of the school experience, including workload coordination, assessment scheduling, time balance and the rhythm of the school week. In many cases, students appear to need more manageable and humane learning conditions rather than simply more exhortation to persevere.

The baseline also highlights the protective role of school climate. Students' strongest in-school protective factor is peer relationships. The very high share of positive responses on this item suggests that classmates and friends are an important anchor for students' persistence in education. A sense of belonging to the school community is also relatively strong overall, though less uniformly than peer relations. This distinction matters: students may feel socially connected to peers without necessarily feeling fully embedded in the school as an institution. Retention strategies therefore need to strengthen both horizontal relationships among students and vertical relationships between students and the school system around them.

Teacher support is moderately strong but leaves room for improvement. Around two thirds of students experience teachers as supportive and approachable, which is positive, but it still means that a considerable minority remain neutral or negative. Access to help follows a similar pattern. Students are more confident about where to seek academic help than personal help, suggesting that schools may be more visible and structured in their academic support pathways than in their well-being or pastoral support systems.

Another notable result concerns school activities and programmes designed to promote well-being. This is the weakest protective factor among the more positive items: only 49.7% respond positively, while 39.4% remain neutral. The result does not necessarily mean that such activities are absent, but it does suggest that many students either do not experience them as meaningful support or do not associate them strongly with their own well-being. This area therefore appears especially relevant for later project work on school-based retention measures that go beyond classroom teaching and formal academic support.

The two open-ended questions are especially valuable because they show how students themselves frame the issue of retention. The dominant challenge is not a simple lack of ambition or willingness to study. Instead, students most often describe a combination of heavy workload, overlapping deadlines, tiredness, stress, long days and difficulty balancing school with the rest of life. Several responses also point to uncertainty about the future, the feeling that some subjects are not meaningful, difficulty understanding some lessons, and classroom environments that are noisy or discouraging.

When students are asked what schools could do to make them feel more supported, their suggestions are pragmatic and actionable. They ask for shorter or better-balanced school days, less homework pressure, fewer assessments clustered together, more approachable adults, more individual check-ins, better attention to mental health, clearer guidance on academic choices and future pathways, and more engaging activities that make school feel less mechanical. Importantly, many responses do not ask for radically new structures; they ask for schools to be more attentive, better coordinated and more humane in how support is organised.

The qualitative responses therefore align closely with the quantitative results. This convergence strengthens the credibility of the baseline. The central issue is not only whether support exists in principle, but whether students experience school as manageable, meaningful and relationally supportive in daily practice.

Several implications emerge directly from the baseline. First, retention should be approached as a balance between protective and risk factors rather than as a binary distinction between engaged and at-

risk students. Many respondents are motivated and supported, yet still experience levels of pressure that can erode persistence over time. Second, workload and time pressure deserve a central place in the handbook, not merely as background conditions but as core retention issues. Third, belonging and peer relationships appear to be major protective factors and should be treated as strategic assets in dropout prevention rather than as secondary aspects of school life.

Fourth, access to support is uneven across domains. Academic help is more visible than personal help, suggesting that schools may need clearer pastoral pathways and stronger communication around where students can turn when personal difficulties begin to affect participation. Fifth, the weaker results on school activities and programmes indicate that well-being measures may need to be more visible, better connected to students' actual needs, and more clearly embedded within the wider school experience.

Finally, the country-level variation confirms the value of the project's comparative design. The data suggests that different partner contexts can contribute different strengths to the handbook: Finland offers examples of stronger protective conditions, Sweden highlights the tension between achievement and pressure, and the Danish results point to a more acute need to address dropout risk directly. Together, these patterns provide a strong foundation for identifying transferable practices that are both evidence-based and sensitive to context.

4. Best Practices and Tools for Educators

The comparative evidence presented in this handbook shows that student retention improves when schools move from isolated **support measures** to a more coherent, **everyday practice in which teaching, well-being, guidance, and follow-up are closely connected**. This implies that support for students should not be limited to occasional well-being days or stand-alone initiatives, but embedded in daily school routines, classroom interactions, and the overall organisation of learning. At EU level, recent policy work has increasingly framed early school leaving prevention as a whole-school and whole-system task, not simply as a response to individual student failure. The 2022 Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success promotes a systemic approach built around prevention, early intervention, and compensation, while the 2021 Council Recommendation on blended learning stresses that inclusion, flexibility, and quality teaching must remain central when schools use a mix of digital and face-to-face approaches. In the same direction, the 2025 Interreg Europe policy brief on early leavers and NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) highlights five recurring priorities: better data and monitoring, comprehensive strategic planning, special attention to transitions, personalised early prevention, and trust-based local support. Together, these sources suggest that effective school action depends on a combination of strong pedagogy, timely identification of risk, and coordinated support around the learner, including a clearer recognition of how students' experiences outside school interact with what happens inside it.

A first implication for educators is that retention must begin inside ordinary classroom practice. Many students do not disengage because they reject education altogether, but because daily school life becomes too difficult to manage, too impersonal, or too disconnected from future goals. This means that prevention starts with teaching that is clear, structured, and achievable, while still challenging and meaningful. At the same time, classroom practice should acknowledge that students' **home environments** and wider **life circumstances** influence their capacity to engage, even if schools have limited direct control over these factors. European evidence from the pandemic period showed that students benefited when schools provided additional small-group tutoring, differentiated teaching, and more explicit structure, especially after disruption or periods of distance learning. The same Eurydice review also found that school closures and distance learning tended to widen pre-existing inequalities, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with weaker home support, or those with limited access to digital resources. In practical terms, teachers can translate this into classroom action by making lesson goals visible, sequencing tasks more clearly, checking understanding more frequently, and ensuring that support is embedded in teaching rather than offered only after difficulties have accumulated.

A second principle is that schools should treat attendance, participation, and belonging as core educational indicators, not merely administrative concerns. Across the partner countries, the warning signs described by educators are strikingly consistent: rising absenteeism, lower classroom participation, social withdrawal, weakened communication, and visible fatigue. Importantly, belonging should be understood not only in terms of close friendships, but also in relation to the wider class community. A **positive class climate**, where students feel accepted, included, and able to participate, plays a central role in retention. EU guidance now strongly supports the use of early-warning approaches that combine quantitative indicators such as attendance and performance with qualitative information from teachers, counsellors, and students themselves. The purpose of such monitoring is not surveillance, but timely support. Schools therefore need routines through which concerning patterns trigger a conversation, not a punishment-first response. In practice, this can include weekly review of attendance patterns, short pastoral check-ins, rapid follow-up after missed assignments, and shared staff procedures so that students receive consistent responses rather than fragmented messages from different adults. The evidence suggests that early identification works best when it is tied to action pathways that are simple, relational, and predictable.

This point is especially relevant in Denmark, where policy and practice place strong emphasis on guidance, transitions, and alternative pathways for young people not yet ready for a standard upper secondary route. Denmark's education policy has set a long-term goal that by 2030 at least 90% of 25-year-olds should complete a youth education, and preparatory basic education and training (FGU) was designed to help young people under 25 develop the academic, personal, and social competences needed to move into upper secondary education, vocational training, or the labour market. For classroom and school practice, the Danish lesson is not only about alternative provision, but about the importance of early transition support, realistic orientation, and clear "next-step" guidance. In schools, this can be translated into stronger induction periods at the start of upper secondary education, closer monitoring in the first months of Year 1, more explicit support for study skills, and more deliberate work on class community formation. This includes structuring collaboration so that students work across the class rather than only within existing friendship groups, thereby strengthening broader peer connections and reducing social fragmentation. Where expectations are clarified early and students quickly feel connected to both peers and adults, the risk of early dropout appears lower.

In Sweden, the evidence points to a somewhat different but related priority. Sweden's pandemic follow-up by the National Agency for Education concluded that the crisis amplified existing inequalities, made the compensatory mission of schools more difficult, and affected knowledge development and well-being unevenly across student groups. The agency also found that remote teaching was often associated with lower teaching quality, more difficult interaction, and weaker opportunities for support and stimulation, while some of the most persistent effects concerned motivation, well-being, absenteeism, and subject-specific loss of knowledge, especially in mathematics and for students who already had weaker conditions for success. At the same time, Sweden's upper secondary system includes introductory programmes for students who are not eligible for national programmes, showing a structural commitment to flexible pathways rather than exclusion. For educators, the Swedish case underlines the importance of combining academic support with pastoral support, particularly through clearer structure, stable adult relationships, targeted follow-up, and flexible bridging routes for students whose transition into upper secondary education is fragile. In practice, this means that classroom teachers, mentors, and student support staff need to work in tandem so that stress, attendance issues, and academic difficulty are addressed as interconnected rather than separate problems.

The Finnish experience highlights the value of a strong support architecture combined with student-centred flexibility. Finland's extension of compulsory education to age 18 was explicitly designed to ensure that all young people complete an upper secondary qualification, while also strengthening student guidance, welfare services, and equality of opportunity. Official information on the reform stresses not only the raising of the school leaving age, but also better guidance, stronger student welfare, and efforts to reduce financial barriers linked to upper secondary participation. This has direct implications for schools: retention is strengthened when support is normalised, accessible, and built into the system rather than reserved only for crisis cases. Finnish practice is therefore especially relevant where it points to routine one-to-one discussions, small-group support, special education availability, teacher collaboration, and multidisciplinary review structures as part of normal school functioning. For classroom educators, the Finnish lesson is that autonomy should be paired with scaffolding: students

stay engaged when they can progress with some independence, but still have timely guidance, manageable pacing, and adults who help them plan, organise, and recover from setbacks.

In Ireland, the key lesson is the importance of targeted disadvantage policy combined with local retention supports. The DEIS Plan positions education as a pathway to better opportunities for communities affected by disadvantage, while the School Completion Programme (SCP) provides targeted interventions for children and young people identified as being at risk of early school leaving. Tusla's official description of SCP makes clear that the programme is designed to support attendance, participation, and retention through locally adapted interventions, and the wider TESS structure connects school completion work with educational welfare and home-school-community liaison. This offers an important practical model for schools: retention improves when support is not limited to academic remediation, but includes attendance work, family engagement, mentoring, and community-based coordination. At classroom level, this translates into stronger home-school communication, clearer recognition of the influence of students' life outside school, and teaching practices that maintain high expectations while remaining responsive to different starting points. Ireland's policy direction suggests that effective retention work requires both universal classroom inclusion and targeted additional support for students facing concentrated disadvantage.

Across all four partner countries, one theme stands out with particular force: relationships are not secondary to learning; they are part of the conditions that make learning possible. The student and educator evidence collected in the project repeatedly shows that motivation is more stable when students feel seen by teachers, experience respectful peer relations, and feel part of a wider class community, not only small friendship groups. This is fully consistent with wider EU and comparative evidence. Pathways to School Success emphasises positive learning climates, active inclusion, and tailored support for learners at risk, while the Interreg policy brief stresses trust-building and bringing services closer to young people. For schools, this means that relational practices should be treated as professional practices: greeting students, noticing absence, asking follow-up questions, structuring mentoring conversations, and deliberately building group cohesion are not "extra" activities, but core retention work.

Another major area for classroom and school action is workload, pacing, and the organisation of the student day. The project evidence from Sweden, Denmark, and Finland shows that many students remain broadly motivated, yet still experience overload, tiredness, competing deadlines, and difficulty balancing school with the rest of life. This finding deserves serious pedagogical attention. If students perceive school as constantly demanding but insufficiently manageable, even otherwise engaged learners may begin to disconnect. Teachers and school leaders therefore need to look not only at what is taught, but also at how the total student workload accumulates across subjects and across the week. Practical strategies include coordinating assessment calendars, reducing unnecessary clustering of deadlines, providing more in-class time for guided work, making homework more purposeful and realistic, and distinguishing clearly between essential and extension tasks. None of these changes lowers expectations; rather, they make persistence more achievable.

The role of blended and digital learning also needs careful handling. The pandemic accelerated digitalisation across Europe and, in some cases, created lasting improvements in structure, resource-sharing, and communication. At the same time, digital environments also raise challenges related to distraction and sustained attention, which need to be actively managed within teaching practice. For this reason, digital tools should be used as a support for retention only when they reinforce clarity, continuity, and access. In practice, this means using learning platforms to provide transparent schedules, materials, and deadlines; offering hybrid or flexible options selectively for students with specific needs; and ensuring that digital teaching is paired with human contact, feedback, and accountability.

For educators, the most useful tools are therefore not necessarily complex programmes, but well-designed routines that schools can sustain. These include an attendance and participation review process, scheduled mentor check-ins, induction activities for new students, structured study-skills support, tutoring or workshop sessions for incomplete assignments, quiet spaces for concentration and regulation, and regular multidisciplinary meetings for higher-risk cases. Country practice suggests slightly different emphases: Denmark is especially strong on guidance and transitional orientation; Sweden on flexible pathways and targeted support; Finland on integrated support structures and everyday follow-up; Ireland on targeted retention supports linked to disadvantage and attendance.

Ultimately, translating best practices into classroom and school action requires schools to see retention as a shared pedagogical responsibility. It is not only the task of counsellors, welfare teams, or senior management. Subject teachers influence retention through lesson design, assessment rhythm, communication, and responsiveness. Mentors influence retention through trust and follow-up. School leaders influence retention through staffing, structures, and the time they protect for collaboration. Policy frameworks across Europe now point in the same direction: student retention improves when schools combine prevention, early intervention, flexible support, and strong local coordination. For the Engaging Minds partnership, this means that practical action should be organised around a simple but demanding principle: every student should encounter a school experience that is structured enough to feel manageable, relational enough to feel safe, and meaningful enough to feel worth continuing.

5. Case Studies from partner countries

5.1 Denmark: Reducing Digital Distractions to Improve Student Engagement and Retention: The Experience of Campus Vejle HF & STX

In recent years, schools across Europe have increasingly faced the challenge of managing digital technologies in the classroom. Smartphones, laptops, and other digital devices are now essential tools for learning, communication, and information access. At the same time, their constant presence has raised concerns among educators regarding **student concentration, classroom interaction, and learning engagement**.

Research in educational psychology (Ågård, D., Research on digital distraction and student attention in education) has shown that **frequent digital interruptions and multitasking** can negatively affect students' ability to sustain attention during complex learning tasks. Notifications, messaging applications, and social media can easily divert attention away from the learning activity, leading to fragmented concentration and reduced cognitive engagement. This challenge is particularly relevant in **upper secondary education**, where students often have unrestricted access to personal devices throughout the school day.

In Denmark, these concerns have led to growing national debate about the role of digital technologies in education. The **Danish Ministry of Children and Education** has issued recommendations encouraging schools to develop clear institutional policies regarding screen use in classrooms. These recommendations emphasize the importance of ensuring that digital tools are used **only when they provide clear pedagogical value**, while also protecting students' ability to focus and participate actively in learning activities.

Within this context, Campus Vejle HF & STX, an upper secondary institution in Denmark, implemented a comprehensive initiative aimed at reducing digital distractions and strengthening the overall learning environment. The initiative represents a practical example of how schools can respond to the challenges posed by digital technologies while supporting student engagement and well-being.

5.1.1 The intervention: a structured screen policy

To address the issue of digital distraction, Campus Vejle HF & STX introduced a **structured screen policy** that applies consistently across all classes. The objective was not to eliminate digital technologies from teaching but rather to ensure that their use is **purposeful, intentional, and pedagogically justified**.

One of the central elements of the policy involves the management of mobile phones during lessons. At the beginning of each class, students place their phones in **designated phone boxes** located in the classroom (Figure 33).



Figure 33: phone boxes

This simple but effective measure prevents interruptions caused by notifications and reduces the temptation to check messages or social media during learning activities.

In addition, laptops and computers must remain closed at the start of the lesson, unless their use is required for a specific educational task. This approach encourages students to begin lessons with full attention directed toward the teacher and the learning objectives.

Teachers are also encouraged to incorporate analogue learning activities, such as group discussions, handwritten exercises, collaborative problem solving, and reflective classroom dialogue. These activities help create a more balanced relationship between digital and non-digital learning methods.

The policy therefore aims not only to reduce distraction but also to **strengthen interpersonal interaction and active participation** in classroom learning.

5.1.2 Pedagogical Foundations

The initiative at Campus Vejle HF & STX is informed by both national policy recommendations and academic research on student attention and classroom engagement.

The Danish Ministry of Children and Education has highlighted the need for schools to establish **clear guidelines on screen use**, supported by strong leadership and open dialogue among teachers and students. According to national recommendations, effective screen policies should:

- reduce unnecessary digital distractions during lessons
- ensure that technology supports rather than disrupts learning
- promote a balanced use of digital and analogue teaching methods

In addition, the work of Danish educational researcher Dorte Ågård has played an important role in shaping the school's approach. Ågård's research focuses on the relationship between classroom management, student attention, and digital device use. Her studies suggest that continuous access to smartphones and computers can significantly reduce students' capacity to maintain sustained attention during teaching activities.

When digital devices are restricted or carefully managed, students are more likely to engage in **deeper learning processes**, participate actively in classroom discussions, and maintain concentration for longer periods of time.

5.1.3 Implementation and Professional Development

Recognising that effective implementation requires more than simple rules, Campus Vejle HF & STX complemented the screen policy with a range of internal development initiatives aimed at strengthening teaching practices and improving the learning environment.

One of the key tools used was the **Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI)**. This instrument allows schools to collect structured feedback on the quality of student–teacher interaction within the classroom. By analysing responses from students, teachers can gain valuable insights into how their teaching style influences engagement, communication, and motivation.

The school also introduced a system of **peer observation**, where teachers observe each other’s lessons and exchange feedback on teaching methods. These observations provide opportunities for professional reflection and collaborative learning among educators.

Through peer dialogue, teachers discuss questions such as:

- How can digital tools be integrated effectively without distracting students?
- Which teaching activities encourage the highest level of student participation?
- How can classroom management strategies support focused learning environments?

This collaborative approach encourages teachers to experiment with different pedagogical techniques while building a shared understanding of effective classroom practices.

5.1.4 Outcomes, Observed Benefits and Lessons Learnt

Although the screen policy is a relatively recent initiative, teachers and school leaders have already observed several positive effects.

First, classrooms have become **less fragmented and more focused**, with students demonstrating greater attention during lessons. By removing the constant presence of smartphones, teachers report that students are more likely to engage with the material and participate in discussions.

Second, the initiative has strengthened **student-teacher interaction**, as lessons increasingly rely on dialogue, group work, and collaborative learning activities.

Third, the policy has contributed to a **more balanced learning environment**, where digital technologies are used strategically rather than continuously.

From a broader perspective, these improvements are directly connected to the goals of **student retention and dropout prevention**. When students feel engaged in lessons, experience meaningful interactions with teachers, and participate actively in classroom activities, they are more likely to maintain motivation and remain connected to the educational process.

Reducing digital distraction therefore becomes not only a classroom management strategy but also a preventive measure against student disengagement.

The experience of Campus Vejle HF & STX offers several insights that may be relevant for other educational institutions seeking to strengthen student engagement.

First, effective technology management does not necessarily require banning digital devices. Instead, schools can develop **clear and consistent policies** that ensure digital tools are used intentionally and with pedagogical purpose.

Second, successful implementation requires the **active involvement of teachers**, supported by opportunities for professional reflection and collaboration.

Finally, initiatives that improve classroom attention and interaction can play an important role in **supporting student retention**, as they help create learning environments in which students feel focused, motivated, and involved.

5.2 Sweden, Flexible Pathways and Individualised Support to Prevent Early School Leaving

Sweden has long prioritised preventing early school leaving by creating flexible pathways for students who struggle in traditional academic environments. The Swedish education system is structured to provide several routes through compulsory and upper secondary education, allowing students to continue their studies even when they face academic or social challenges. Students complete nine years of compulsory schooling before progressing to upper secondary education, where they can choose between national programmes or alternative pathways designed for those who need additional preparation.

Despite relatively low early school leaving rates compared with many European countries, some students, particularly those with academic difficulties, mental health challenges, or socio-economic disadvantages, risk disengaging from education during the transition to upper secondary school.

To address this challenge, Sweden introduced the Introduction Programme (Introduktionsprogrammet) within upper secondary education. The programme supports students aged 16-19 who do not meet the entry requirements for national upper secondary programmes, offering them personalised learning pathways designed to re-engage them in education.

Instead of excluding students from the education system, the Swedish approach focuses on individualised support, mentorship, and gradual reintegration into mainstream education.

5.2.1 Practical Example: Fyrisskolan Upper Secondary School (Uppsala)

A concrete example of this approach can be found at Fyrisskolan, a large upper secondary school located in Uppsala. The school hosts several Introduction Programme pathways and has implemented targeted strategies to support students at risk of dropping out.

At Fyrisskolan, educators observed that many students entering the programme had experienced academic failure in compulsory school or felt disengaged from traditional classroom environments. In response, the school developed a structured support model combining **individual study plans, mentorship, and practical learning opportunities**.

Each student enrolled in the programme receives a **personalised learning plan developed collaboratively by teachers, guidance counsellors, and the student**. This plan identifies the student's strengths, academic gaps, and future aspirations. The goal is to create a realistic pathway towards qualification for a national programme, vocational education, or employment.

A key component of the initiative is the mentor system, where each student is assigned a teacher responsible for monitoring progress, attendance, and well-being. Regular meetings between mentors and students allow challenges to be identified early and addressed through adapted learning strategies or additional support.

Teachers at Fyrisskolan also integrate project-based and vocational learning activities, which help students reconnect education with practical goals and career opportunities. For example, students may participate in workplace visits, short internships, or collaborative projects with local organisations.

This combination of personalised academic support and real-world learning has helped students regain motivation and confidence in their ability to succeed in education.

Educators at Fyrisskolan report several positive outcomes from the programme. Students who previously struggled in traditional academic settings often demonstrate **increased motivation and improved attendance** once they receive personalised support and flexible learning options.

The mentor system also strengthens student–teacher relationships, which research shows are a critical factor in preventing early school leaving. Students feel more supported and are more likely to seek help when facing difficulties.

Over time, many students successfully transition from the Introduction Programme to national upper secondary programmes or vocational pathways, illustrating how targeted interventions can help students reconnect with education.

The experience at Fyrisskolan illustrates how schools can respond to the different factors that often contribute to student disengagement. The most common early school leaving risk factors and the corresponding intervention measures implemented in Swedish schools are summarised in Table 3 below:

Common Risk Factors for Dropout	Interventions Used in Swedish Schools
Academic difficulties in core subjects	Individualised learning plans
Low motivation and disengagement	Project-based and vocational learning
Lack of confidence after school failure	Mentorship and counselling
Social or emotional challenges	Collaboration with school welfare services
Poor attendance patterns	Early warning and monitoring systems

Table 3: Common risk factors for dropout and interventions used in Swedish schools

The interventions described above are typically implemented as part of a structured support pathway designed to help students gradually re-engage with education. In practice, students who experience academic difficulties during compulsory school and are unable to access national upper secondary programmes may enter the Introduction Programme, where they receive personalised learning plans, mentorship, and adapted teaching methods. Through smaller learning groups, continuous monitoring, and targeted support, students can progressively rebuild confidence, improve academic performance, and strengthen their motivation to learn. As their progress stabilises, many students are able to transition into national upper secondary programmes, vocational education pathways, or employment opportunities, demonstrating how structured support mechanisms can effectively guide students back into sustainable educational trajectories.

5.2.3 Early School Leaving Trends in Sweden

Early school leaving in Europe is measured as the share of young people aged 18-24 who leave education and training without completing upper secondary education. According to recent data from Eurostat, Sweden reports a rate of approximately 7–8%, slightly below the EU average of around 9–10%.

Although Sweden performs relatively well compared with the European average, the figures still indicate that a proportion of students struggle to complete upper secondary education. Many of these challenges emerge during the secondary school years, particularly between the ages of 14 and 19, when students transition from compulsory education to upper secondary programmes.

For this reason, Swedish education policies place strong emphasis on early support measures within secondary schools, including personalised learning pathways, mentoring systems, and flexible programmes such as the Introduction Programme. These measures aim to support students who experience academic or social difficulties and help them remain engaged in education.

The Swedish approach demonstrates that preventing school dropout requires more than academic interventions. Successful strategies combine **educational flexibility, personal support, and strong relationships between students and teachers**.

Schools that adopt structured mentorship systems, personalised learning plans, and practical learning experiences can significantly improve student engagement and retention.

These approaches show how education systems can transform early academic difficulties into opportunities for students to reconnect with learning and build successful future pathways.

5.3 Tampere University Teacher Training School, Finland: the Suunta project

When a student begins their studies at a Finnish upper secondary school, they are assigned a homeroom class, which in turn is assigned a tutor. The tutor is a teacher who oversees and promotes the well-being and overall school motivation of the students in the class. They also act as the first contact between the student and the school staff in the case of any problems or issues. The role of the tutor is crucial for student well-being and -retention, and as such it is also demanding for the teacher.

In the 2022-23 school year, Tampere University Teacher Training School, in collaboration with other high schools in the Tampere region, started the Suunta -project. The project was financed by the Finnish Board of Education. The aim of the project was twofold:

1. The project aimed to share best practices and develop new classroom tools to support the tutors in their work.

2. The project aimed to strengthen the collaboration between the tutors both within and between schools.

5.3.1 Classroom tools

As it was acknowledged that the students have different needs based on what stage they are at in their studies, the classroom tools were categorized according to the students' study year. In Finland this means 1st, 2nd and 3rd years, plus an optional 4th year.

The tools were further categorized based on the skill they are meant to develop or the issue they are designed to tackle. These categories were slightly different in each study year, but generally they could be divided into four categories.

Social skills and team building is highlighted at the beginning of upper secondary school studies. The students come from different schools and backgrounds, and even though they are assigned a homeroom class, the groups they study in will vary as they take their courses. This places an emphasis on how team building is handled in the first year. In the second and third year this theme continues from the perspective of overall social and communication skills.

Study skills as a theme stretches throughout the student's time in upper secondary school. At the beginning the emphasis is on recognizing one's most effective ways to work and study, as well as to familiarize oneself with the pace and requirements of upper secondary school studies. In the second year these skills are developed, and more focus is placed on developing one's **intrinsic motivation and ability to focus on achieving specific goals**. In the third year the main focus is on preparing for the matriculation examination (the Finnish school-leaving exam). The focus on motivation, goals and sustained effort can also be seen as encouraging students to adapt to an increasingly demanding academic environment. Success is closely linked to self-management and persistence, which can hide the fact that students differ greatly in their backgrounds, support systems, and life situations.

Time management is discussed specifically in the first and second year. In the first year it is closely linked to study skills, as the students prepare for the pace of upper secondary school and for example develop ways to cope with exam weeks and the required preparation. Of course, general time management and scheduling issues are discussed, and this takes more of a role in the second year, when the students are given more practical tips on personal scheduling. In addition, they are encouraged to learn how to prioritize tasks. The strong focus on time management in the first two study years shows that lack of time is a common part of students' experience. The provided support mainly helps students use their limited time more efficiently.

Well-being and stress management is a broad theme and it is looked at from multiple aspects throughout upper secondary school. The overarching goal is to alleviate stress that tends to build up the further one is in their studies. In the first year there is a more general goal to think about ways to uphold one's wellbeing. In the second year there is a clear focus on **positive reinforcement**, and the students are encouraged to for example recognize and build on their strengths. In the third year, once again, the main goal is to help students **deal with exam stress and develop ways to unwind** in the midst of demanding exam preparation.

5.3.2 Tutor collaboration

One aspect of the project was an analysis of different means of student support during high school studies, and the application of best practices. The project developed a model for co-operation between different professionals inside the school, including:

- subject teachers
- tutors
- guidance councilors
- special education teachers
- student tutors
- school psychologists, social workers and school nurses

As a result of the project, a regional network of tutor was launched. The purpose of this network is to regularly gather the tutors of classes in every school year (1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th) to discuss and share best practices and classroom tools. This approach at a smaller scale has been in use in both Tampere University Teacher Training School and the City of Tampere. Overall, the Suunta project shows how schools can strengthen shared support for students. At the same time, it shows that much of this support helps students cope with high academic pressure. Supporting retention is therefore linked not only to how support is organised, but also to how demanding upper secondary education has become and what kinds of lives it prepares students for.

The full results of the project are available online at the Library of Open Educational Resources (<https://aoe.fi/#/materiaali/3041>)

5.4 An Irish school's approach to reducing early school leaving and avoidance

St. Joseph's Secondary School in Rush, Co. Dublin has taken a policy-aligned, multi-layered, and relational approach to address student disengagement and preventing early school leaving. The school demonstrates how national frameworks, in particular Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) and Tusla Education Support Services (TESS) can be successfully translated into effective, local practice.

5.4.1 The Challenge

Ireland has significantly reduced early school leaving rates to approximately 4%, but disengagement with education remains a challenge among students who experience complex life circumstances related to socio-economic disadvantage, additional needs, and mental health. St. Joseph's staff identified a number of risk factors for student disengagement. They include:

- Inconsistent attendance and school avoidance
- Unmet learning and mental health needs
- Low education expectations in some home contexts
- Difficulties experienced during key transitions.

Simultaneously, student survey data shows students are largely highly motivated and future-oriented, but experience academic pressure imposed by the Junior and Leaving Cert assessment and varying levels of classroom engagement.

This highlights an important insight that disengagement is not always linked to a lack of motivation or student circumstances, and can reflect the complex ways in which students and school staff need to interact with the structures and demands of the education system.

St. Joseph's has developed a whole-school prevention model aligned with DEIS and TESS principles. It is focused on reducing attendance and engagement triggers through a coordinated response. This includes:

- Weekly student support team meetings
- Collaboration with education welfare services
- Proactive engagement with parents and the community

This is a best-practice approach that reflects the recognition that attendance is a key predictor of educational outcomes.

Relationships and belonging are at the core of the school's approach. Staff prioritise that every student has access to a trusted adult in the school, and there is alignment with the DEIS and HSCL (Home School Community Liaison) principles that emphasise the importance of relational engagement. Students themselves report high levels of peer connection and sense of school community, have largely positive perceptions of teacher support, and have high levels of motivation to complete their secondary education in St. Joseph's.

Building trust with families of students who show early or advanced signs of disengagement with school and education is prioritised by the school. This reflects TESS and HSCL best practice. St. Joseph's is continuously investing in a relationship model for parental engagement that includes initiatives such as:

- Informal, ongoing communication strategies with parents and students by the school liaison officer
- Community based meetings and outreach such as evening classes and day trips
- Supporting efforts that reduce barriers to education for families less familiar with the Irish education system

These initiatives have played a key role in positioning the school as a central and supportive part of the wider community.

5.4.2 Flexible Learning Pathways

St. Joseph's recognises that the traditional academic routes in the Irish education system do not suit all learners and impacts school engagement for quite a few students. Within the parameters of the national education system, the school actively promotes pathways that provide practical, skills-based and student-centered alternatives. The specific offer of flexible pathways includes:

- Transition Year (TY)
- Leaving Cert Applied (LCA)
- Gradual reintegration plans for students who have or are at risk of disengagement.

The school employs a proactive approach to ensure these options to ensure a wider range of students have a positive school experience and remain engaged.

5.4.3 Impact and Value

The whole-school, integrated approach to manage risk of disengagement has several benefits.

- The potential for student retention has increased as students are highly motivated and have little intention to leave school early
- The school benefits from an improved sense of belonging and wellbeing which are critical protective factors
- Risks of disengagement are identified earlier, leading to increased data sharing and collaboration with primary schools. This enables a focus on prevention rather than intervention
- Student support is delivered through sustained engagement because of stronger school – family relationships

St. Joseph's Secondary School demonstrates how national frameworks can be effectively operationalised in practice. The school aligns with DEIS through targeted support and relational practice, with TESS through attendance and family engagement strategies, and with national early school leaving policy through early intervention and a whole-school approach.

This case study highlights several key takeaways:

- The importance of early, relationship-based support
- The value of listening to student voice
- The need to offer flexible pathways to better meet diverse learning needs

Overall, the school's approach reflects the continued evolution of Irish policy, with a growing emphasis on participation, wellbeing, and a sense of belonging for all students.

6. Conclusions and Key Takeaways for Educators

The analysis carried out within the Engaging Minds project, supported by comparative evidence from Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Ireland, as well as broader European and OECD research, leads to a clear and consistent conclusion: student engagement and retention are the result of a continuous and dynamic process, shaped by the interaction between academic experience, social relationships, and individual well-being. Disengagement does not occur as a single event, nor can it be explained by one isolated factor. Rather, it develops progressively, often through the accumulation of small difficulties that, if unaddressed, gradually weaken students' connection to school.

As outlined in chapter 1.2, student disengagement develops through the interaction of structural, social, and personal factors, including socio-economic background, family context, identity formation, and the school environment. This broader perspective is important for interpreting the findings presented in this handbook. The empirical results focus primarily on how students experience school, particularly in terms of stress, engagement, belonging, and perceived support. However, these dimensions do not operate independently from students' wider lives. Experiences such as high stress or a weak sense of connection to school may therefore reflect not only academic demands, but also external pressures, personal circumstances, or challenges linked to students' developmental stage. The patterns identified in the data should therefore be understood within this wider ecosystem, where school-level experiences both shape and are shaped by factors beyond the classroom. From this perspective, engagement and disengagement are not isolated school phenomena, but rather the result of continuous interactions between students and their broader context.

One of the most significant findings emerging from both the project data and international research is the coexistence of high overall motivation with a persistent layer of vulnerability. Many students describe themselves as committed to completing their education and aware of its importance for their future, yet at the same time report experiencing stress, uncertainty, or moments of disconnection. This

reflects a broader pattern identified in European studies on early school leaving, which emphasise that disengagement should not be understood only in terms of visible withdrawal or dropout, but also as a latent condition affecting students who remain formally enrolled while struggling to maintain engagement. For educators, this has important implications. It suggests that attention should not be limited to those already identified as at risk, but should extend to the wider student population, recognising that disengagement can develop in less visible ways.

At the core of this process lies the multi-dimensional nature of engagement. The findings confirm that engagement is shaped by the interplay between motivation, sense of belonging, perceived relevance of learning, and the ability to cope with academic demands. These dimensions are closely interconnected. When students perceive their education as meaningful and linked to future opportunities, their motivation tends to be stronger. When they feel part of a supportive social environment, their sense of belonging increases, reinforcing participation and persistence. Conversely, when academic demands become difficult to manage or when students feel isolated, the balance between these dimensions can be disrupted. This interconnectedness is well documented in OECD and EU research, which highlights that student outcomes depend not only on cognitive factors, but also on emotional and social conditions within the learning environment.

Within this framework, one of the most critical areas for action is the early identification of disengagement processes. Across all partner countries, educators consistently describe similar early warning signs: increasing or irregular absenteeism, reduced classroom participation, lack of communication, and social withdrawal. These indicators rarely appear suddenly; instead, they develop gradually and can often be observed well before more serious disengagement occurs. European policy frameworks increasingly stress the importance of early detection combined with timely intervention, emphasising that prevention is more effective and less resource-intensive than remedial action at later stages. However, the effectiveness of early identification depends on how it is embedded within school practice. It requires not only the capacity to recognise signals, but also the presence of clear procedures, shared responsibility among staff, and consistent follow-up. Without these elements, early warning systems risk becoming descriptive rather than actionable.

Closely linked to early identification is the role of relationships as a fundamental condition for engagement. The evidence from both the project and international literature converges strongly on this point: students are more likely to remain engaged when they feel recognised, supported, and respected by their teachers. The quality of everyday interactions, how educators communicate, provide feedback, and respond to difficulties, has a direct impact on students' willingness to participate and persist. This reinforces the idea that relationships are not peripheral to learning, but integral to it. At the same time, the findings also highlight the structural challenges that educators face, including limited time, large class sizes, and competing demands. This suggests that strengthening relational practices cannot rely solely on individual effort, but must be supported by organisational conditions that prioritise time for interaction, mentoring, and follow-up.

Another key dimension concerns the organisation of learning itself. The analysis shows that students benefit from clear, structured, and predictable learning environments, where expectations are transparent and tasks are manageable. Structure provides a sense of stability and helps students navigate academic demands. At the same time, there is a strong need for flexibility, particularly in systems where students have diverse backgrounds, learning needs, and personal circumstances. The comparative evidence indicates that the most effective approaches are those that balance these two dimensions, offering structured pathways while allowing for adaptation. This balance is particularly visible in the Finnish system, where strong support mechanisms coexist with flexibility in learning progression, but it is also reflected in practices across the other partner countries. Systems that are too rigid risk excluding students who cannot keep pace, while those that lack structure may lead to confusion and reduced engagement.

The transition into upper secondary education emerges as a particularly sensitive phase within this broader process. In Denmark and Sweden especially, educators highlight that the first months of study are decisive in shaping students' long-term engagement. During this period, students are required to adapt to new academic expectations, manage increased autonomy, and establish new social relationships. Without adequate support, this combination of challenges can lead to early frustration and disengagement. International research confirms that transitions represent critical points in educational trajectories, where targeted support can have a significant impact on retention. This

underlines the importance of structured induction processes, early academic guidance, and deliberate efforts to foster a sense of belonging from the outset.

The role of well-being and workload also emerges as a central theme. Across all datasets, many students report experiencing pressure related to academic demands, even when they remain motivated. This suggests that disengagement is not always linked to lack of interest, but often to the difficulty of managing cumulative expectations. European research increasingly recognises the importance of well-being as a factor in educational success, highlighting that excessive stress can undermine both engagement and performance. For educators, this implies the need to consider not only what is taught, but how learning is organised across subjects and over time. Coordinating assessment, providing opportunities for guided work during lessons, and supporting students in developing organisational skills can help create a more sustainable learning environment. In this sense, well-being should be understood as an integral component of learning, rather than an external or secondary concern.

While classroom practices are central, their impact is significantly enhanced when embedded within a coherent, whole-school approach. The findings from Finland and Ireland illustrate the value of coordinated support systems that involve collaboration between teachers, counsellors, and external services. OECD research similarly emphasises that effective responses to disengagement require alignment across governance, resources, and pedagogical practices. Schools that establish clear procedures for identifying and supporting students, promote collaboration among staff, and ensure continuity of support are better equipped to address complex challenges. This reinforces the idea that student engagement and retention are not the responsibility of individual educators alone, but of the school as an integrated system.

Taken together, these findings point to a fundamental shift in how engagement should be understood and addressed. Rather than focusing on isolated interventions or short-term solutions, effective practice requires the consistent and intentional development of everyday educational processes. Engagement is sustained when students experience learning as meaningful, manageable, and supported. It is weakened when these conditions are absent or inconsistent. For educators, this means that the most impactful actions are often those embedded in daily practice: how lessons are structured, how expectations are communicated, how relationships are built, and how difficulties are addressed.

Ultimately, the Engaging Minds project demonstrates that improving student engagement and reducing early school leaving is both a pedagogical and organisational challenge. It requires attention to teaching practices, learning environments, support systems, and broader institutional structures. The purpose of this handbook is to support educators in navigating this complexity, translating evidence into practical approaches that can be adapted to different contexts. By strengthening the conditions that sustain engagement, clarity, relevance, belonging, and support, schools can create learning environments in which all students are better able to persist, develop, and succeed.

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