



Press release

Disengagement, under-achievement, lack of motivation: Teachers describe education under Covid and tell of fears for 2023

A new survey completed by 555 New Zealand teachers reveals dramatic learning gaps, overall under-achievement, high levels of student disengagement from school and a worrying lack of student motivation heading into the 2023 school year.

“Numerous written comments by teachers explain the progressive student disengagement from school due to successive lockdowns, whanau ill-health, difficulties engaging with distance learning, falling motivation and growing depression and anxiety” says the report’s main author, Dr Liz Gordon.

Official estimates are that less than 40 percent of students were engaging regularly with school at the end of 2022. “Many participants believe that there will be no happy ‘back to school’ for all students in 2023” says Dr Gordon.

Teachers estimate that most students are behind where they should be in their learning.

- In 2021 only a quarter of participants estimated that their students had completed even three quarters of the year’s curriculum, and most believe this figure has declined further in 2022. This affected schools in all areas, including wealthier ones.
- 2022 saw further disengagement from school, fuelled by very low levels of motivation, high levels of student absence, both Covid and flu in the community and growing levels of student anxiety and depression.
- Students of all types have had problems engaging, but the heaviest impact has fallen on those from disadvantaged communities.
- Where a 1 signals teacher estimates that students are ‘much less engaged’ in education, a 3 indicates ‘about the same’ and a five indicates ‘much more engaged’, decile 1 student engagement averaged at 1.4 and decile 10 engagement at 1.9, demonstrating low engagement is across the board (table included below).
- Many participants were strongly of the view that online and distance learning models reduce motivation, engagement with learning materials, study habits, ability to complete work and overall achievement

QPEC is calling for a national ‘reset’ as schools restart in 2023. This should include:

- A focus on supporting young people back to school as a whole rather than focusing on individual 'truancy' - the problem goes much further than a few naughty tamariki avoiding school.
- Some national leadership which focuses on reinforcing the value that school and education offer to communities and students.
- Recognition of the barriers that whanau face in sending their children back to school, with many struggling financially to purchase school uniforms and other equipment, transport costs and food.
- What is needed is the carrot and not the stick. The government should consider a range of incentives to get children back to school and keep them there. This would be much cheaper in the long term than the cost of policing increasingly lawless and depressed youth.

Liz Gordon, QPEC Vice President

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A few comments from the report reveal the issues:

With every subsequent lock down student engagement got harder and harder to maintain at secondary level.

Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were not supported. Less than 6 out of my 29 students engaged in 'any' kind of learning during lockdown.

It didn't matter how hard the teachers worked to adapt and provide resources, ultimately there was very little we could do to engage the students when they simply didn't log on. Either because of family situations, mental health, or simply doing other things online such as social media and gaming. The lack of engagement and poor attitude towards their learning has persisted since.

Those students who were disengaged before the lockdown went missing and dropped off the face of the earth.

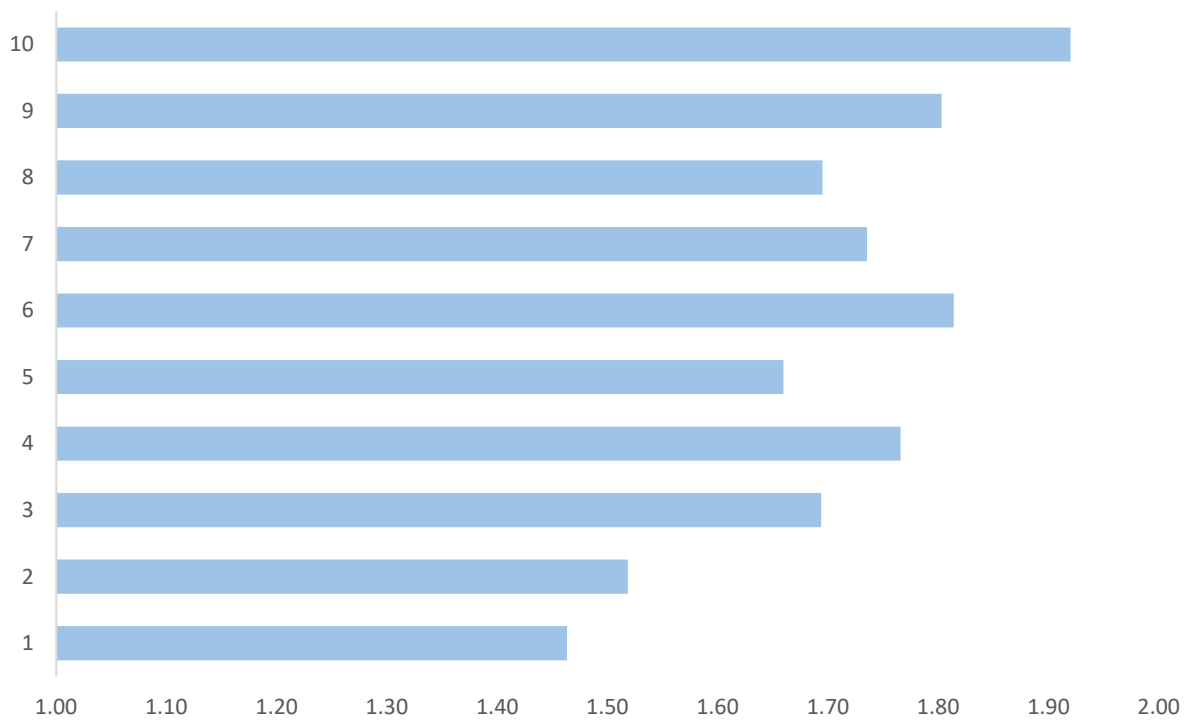
Online learning was not good for the students. They performed well below and are now struggling with motivation to be engaged in learning.

All students I teach are achieving below where I would expect them to. None of my senior students are attempting all three external standards, and none are attempting Scholarship, after three years of disadvantaged learning and stress.

2022 was the hardest year of the pandemic for me and my students. We managed to cover less of the curriculum than in the previous covid years. Attendance was very erratic.

Our community really struggled. They don't come on a regular basis - our truancies are astronomical, and the kids just don't care. They have no motivation or drive to be at school. Behaviour and pastoral care concerns have skyrocketed!

Index of student engagement compared to prior to Covid by school decile



Explanatory note. Each response on the five point scale was given a numerical value: 'much less engaged' = 1, 'less engaged' = 2, 'about the same' = 3, 'more engaged' = 4 and 'much more engaged' = 5. Schools were then sorted by decile and the total for each group was divided by the number of schools in the group to provide an index figure. Note the highest index figure, for decile 10 schools, is still less than '2', the score for 'less engaged'.