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## School Disengagement and its Causes

Francesca Foliano, Elena Meschi, [Anna Vignoles](#)  
*Institute of Education, London, United Kingdom*

### Background

There has been growing focus in UK policy discourse on pupil well being and engagement with school. This is reflected in government initiatives such as the Every Child Matters policy, which is similar to the No Child Left Behind policy in the US. In the UK, the Every Child Matters initiative aims to encourage schools and other professionals to take a new approach to child development and specifically children's education. In particular, the initiative aims to focus policy on the broader aims of schooling and to place much more emphasis on the general well-being of all children. Although academic achievement continues to be an important marker for student and school success, this shift in policy discourse towards discussion of broader outcomes marks a clear departure from the historic emphasis on academic achievement alone. It remains an empirical question however, as to the extent to which schools genuinely do have a major impact on individuals' well being and attitudes and in particular how schools' attempts to improve academic achievement affect pupils' engagement with school.

### Research Questions

In this paper we focus on the extent to which schools influence pupils' engagement with school, measured both in terms of emotional and cognitive engagement determined by subjective questionnaires of pupils and behavioural engagement measured by whether the pupil truants. We ask what pupil and school characteristics appear to influence these forms of pupil disengagement.

### Methods

Our work fits also into the more general and rapidly growing literature on the determinants of non cognitive skills, of which school engagement is one particular dimension. Academic interest in non cognitive skills is motivated by a number of factors. Firstly, there is a growing body of economic evidence that non cognitive skills are valuable in the labour market. Hence we as a society might be as concerned with the development of these non cognitive skills as we are in the development of cognitive skills. Secondly, as school based initiatives and policies have often failed to produce dramatic improvements in academic achievement, interest has shifted to the importance of non cognitive skills, such as academic motivation, as a potential way of positively influencing academic achievement. Finally, in the economic field, work by James Heckman and his co-authors has highlighted the fact that cognitive skills are more malleable in the early years of a child's life and non cognitive skills more malleable than cognitive skills in the teen years. Since many young people fail to progress in terms of their cognitive development in secondary school, there is hope that we might find alternative ways to improve students' well being and productivity by focusing on their non cognitive rather than their skills.

### Frame

In this paper we attempt to uncover causal relationships between pupil characteristics, school features and school engagement, using a fixed effect framework. This enables us to investigate the individual shocks and school characteristics that might have a role in determining the attitude of the young person towards school.

When modelling the determinants of engagement, we consider a set of four equations for each outcome of interest by gender.

By taking into account individual fixed effects we control for the endogeneity that arise due to sorting into schools and for the correlation between observable and unobservable characteristics that are time invariant. Pupil fixed effects account for all student and family factors that do not vary over the period of observation and that affect the disengagement.

### **Research findings**

We find a striking result when using our models which control for unobserved individual heterogeneity. Pupils who are attending schools that are improving their academic achievement levels, as measured by their value added scores, are becoming less cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally engaged. The fact that this result is robust across our different measures of engagement is notable indeed. Perhaps in the process of improving school value added scores, with increasing emphasis on test score performance, some pupils become less engaged with school. We must be clear here however. We are not suggesting that "good" schools with higher levels of academic achievement have less engaged students. We are certainly not saying that individuals who are improving academically are less engaged with school. We clearly see that at an individual level, pupils who are making gains academically also tend to become more engaged with school. Rather we are modelling the effect of a change in a school's value added and its impact on pupils' non cognitive outcomes, namely engagement. We hypothesise that this negative relationship may reflect the increased stress levels and emphasis on academic achievement that comes along with an attempt to bring about school improvement. This may of course be a short run negative impact, an issue we cannot test in our data. Clearly however, this is an issue that requires further (qualitative and quantitative) study.