

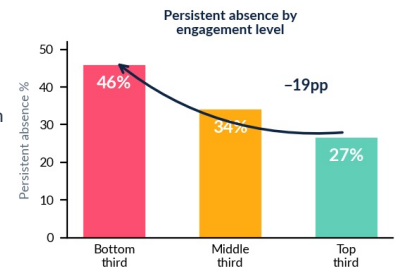
Five things we have learned about engagement

Research Commission Update · February 2026

One year on from the establishment of the Research Commission into Engagement and Lead Indicators, and six months on from the release of its first report, we are delighted to share the interim, headline findings from a follow-up report to be released later this year. Here are five things we have learned:

1 If you take measurement seriously, engagement predicts hard outcomes such as attendance

Engagement is not an abstract concept. When measured rigorously and rooted in the academic literature, it predicts the outcomes that schools are held accountable for. Across secondary schools, those in the bottom third for 'Headline Engagement' in our study have a persistent absence rate of 46%, compared with 27% in the top third, a 19 percentage-point gap. But to measure engagement seriously, it needs to be holistic, avoiding the reductive siloes of 'wellbeing' or 'belonging'. The TEP instrument used for this research captures 11 distinct drivers; together they paint a diagnostic picture for the real-world outcomes that matter in schools.



2 Engagement is a lead indicator of achievement and attainment in primary and secondary schools

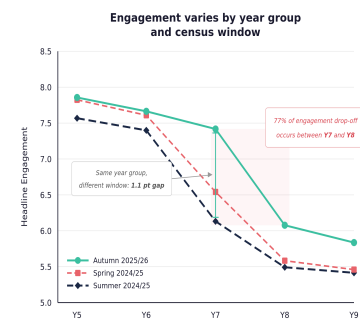
Year 11 Headline Engagement measured in March 2025, for the pupils who then sat their GCSEs, strongly correlates with Attainment 8 results. Every single engagement driver is statistically significant. This is as close to a prediction as you can get from school-level data. Schools in the top third for engagement average almost ten Attainment 8 points higher than the bottom third, roughly a full GCSE grade per subject. There is a similar pattern in primary, where schools in the highest quartile for the agency driver see 45% more pupils achieving the higher standard in RWM at KS2.

~1 grade
Schools in the top third for engagement average nearly one GCSE grade higher per subject than the bottom third

+45%
More pupils achieve the KS2 higher standard in highest-agency schools

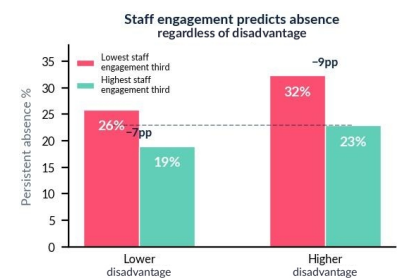
3 It is only possible to measure engagement effectively if you deploy precision benchmarking

As our sample grew to nearly 300 schools we were worried that the data would become vanilla, with all pupils answering the questions in a similar way. Instead, the variances between different groups of pupils became more pronounced. For example, Headline Engagement falls from 8.29 in Year 3 to 5.77 in Year 11, with 77% of the total drop-off concentrated in the single transition from Year 7 to Year 8. This shows how essential it is to compare year group to year group, not wash scores into school averages. The same is true for ethnicity, gender and SEND, all of which show distinct patterns, and benefit from the ability to benchmark with precision. Timing matters as well: the same year group can show engagement gaps of more than a full point depending on the survey term. Schools need to benchmark themselves in fixed windows if they are to trust the data.



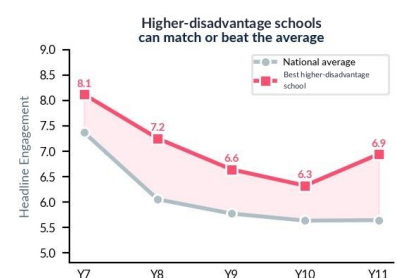
4 Staff engagement and pupil engagement are closely linked

The conventional education narrative holds that pupil outcomes are primarily driven by school intake, the demographics and disadvantage of the community a school serves. This analysis shows that staff engagement is also a powerful predictor, independent of where the school is, who it serves, or how disadvantaged the local area is. Within the higher-disadvantage half of our sample, schools in the top third for staff engagement have persistent absence 9.4 pp lower and Attainment 8 scores 6.5 points higher than the bottom third.



5 Context is important for engagement, but individual schools are bucking national trends

School context matters: higher-disadvantage schools are more likely to sit in the bottom third for engagement. But it doesn't need to be destiny. 29% of secondary schools exceed their cluster benchmark on both engagement and attainment simultaneously, and six of these dual outperformers are in the highest-disadvantage cluster. These outperformers share a consistent profile: stronger safety, peer relationships and inclusion scores. They have built safe, relational, inclusive environments, and their engagement results and outcomes reflect it.



The data that the RCELI used to prepare this digest was taken from two TEP census windows in the academic year 2024-25, comprising of 165,000 pupils across 263 schools (119 secondary and 144 primary). If you would like your school or trust to take part in the next TEP census visit www.tep.uk.