



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION NEW ZEALAND

*Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga Aotearoa*

**“I enjoy school now”**

**Outcomes from the Check & Connect  
trials in New Zealand**

Report to the Ministry of Education

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**New Zealand Council for Educational Research**

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**Check & Connect in New Zealand  
NZCER Evaluation Final Report**

**“I enjoy school now”**

# Outcomes from the Check & Connect trials in New Zealand

**Cathy Wylie and Rachel Felgate**  
final draft after review

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## Summary

This evaluation describes outcomes from the trial of the Check and Connect programme. This programme aims to counter secondary student disengagement with school before it results in dropping out of school, or leaving without qualifications. This trial was funded as part of the Prime Minister’s Youth Mental Health strategy. It is part of the Ministry of Education’s Positive Behaviour for Learning strategy, with the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) contracting non-government organisations (NGOs) to provide mentor teams, using the Check and Connect programme within the Ministry of Education’s national framework.

The Check and Connect programme originated in the United States of America (USA), and had good evidence of success. It provides each student with a mentor who ‘checks in’ weekly on their attendance, behaviour and achievement, and works with the student to equip them with the skills, confidence, and attitudes that enable them to see the purpose of school and find it worthwhile. The programme emphasises the need for ongoing persistence, with mentors working for two years or more with students in the USA.

This report provides the findings from an evaluation of the trial of the programme in New Zealand, focusing on the changes made by students with at least one year’s experience on Check and Connect, at the main three trial sites, by the end of 2015. At this stage in the trial, few of the 138 students covered by the evaluation had the full two years or more participation in Check and Connect recommended in the USA.

This evaluation of the New Zealand trial of the Check and Connect programme in three sites shows that most participating students and their mentors noted positive gains for the students.

Student and mentor reports provide the strongest evidence available for this evaluation. Check and Connect is a customised programme, and consistent information on student needs and school attendance and performance levels before they embarked on Check and Connect to compare with where they were at the end of 2015 was not available. Where we could compare ‘start’ data from student and teacher surveys with data at the end of 2015, the numbers are small, and we are therefore cautious about patterns deriving from those comparisons, particularly the data from teachers, which covers only 16 students.

We certainly see clear trends where we look at some factors that should influence student gains from the programme, such as the length of time on Check and Connect. Because of the small numbers involved, these trends were not statistically significant. In the few comparisons where we could establish statistical significance, in relation to ethnicity and gender, the size of the difference tended to be very large (eg, 20 percent compared with 0 percent), and may be an artefact of the size of the particular group. We would not pay the statistically significant comparisons more attention than the clear trends we found.

Factors that were linked to student gains on Check and Connect were

- length of participation on the programme
- their relationship with their mentor
- their mentor’s use of Check and Connect strategies
- having a mentor who gave high ratings to their training, and support within their team, and

- having a mentor with a good partnership with the school.

We look now at what we found for each of our five evaluation questions.

### **Student change through their participation in Check and Connect**

Evidence from students and mentors shows that the Check and Connect trial has resulted in many positive changes on the outcomes sought, for just over a third of the students, and some or a few changes for almost all the rest of the participants. It was also evident from the interviews and comments on the student survey that some students who would come into our (just) ‘a few changes’ category had made some fundamental shifts, such as increasing their effort and having better academic results, or gaining better ways to deal with things that upset them, getting more support at school, and putting more effort into their schoolwork.

Just under three-quarters of the students responding to the end of 2015 survey said they put more effort into their schoolwork and had better results. Level 1 NCEA achievement was higher than might have been expected, given that most of those for whom we had the information were performing below the general curriculum level for their year when they were nominated. Around two-thirds reported a better sense of their own strengths, and better ways of dealing with things that used to upset them. Student accounts and comments provide some vivid testimony to the “life-changing” difference it could make to their engagement and achievement in school, and their capacity to live more purposefully, confidently, and contentedly in and out of school.

### **Length on Check and Connect**

Gains for students were higher for those students who had had between 18 months to two years on the programme, supporting the original programme design. Changing adolescent habits, feelings and behaviours, especially around low school engagement and performance, is not quick work. The Check and Connect students often presented quite complex needs and circumstances.

Because the students who had had 18 months to two years Check and Connect participation were in the minority, it is likely that the pattern of changes we found for the students in the trial sites is an underestimate of the gains for students participating for the recommended length of time on the programme.

### **Gender**

Female students were more likely than male students to make many changes through their Check and Connect participation. It may be that this is linked to the pull of peers that was evident in student reports of their friendships, with males more likely to have friends who wagged school and wanted them to do stupid things, or who didn’t talk about future hopes and plans, and less likely to talk with their friends about what they were learning in school.

### **Ethnicity**

Māori students were more likely to be seen by their mentors to make many changes than Pasifika students, but this pattern was not evident in the student reports.

### **Reason why students were nominated for Check and Connect**

The information we have on why individual students were nominated for Check and Connect is limited, and we could find no clear patterns in terms of whether the main reason was truancy, lateness, (non)completion of schoolwork, behaviour, or whether they had experienced a recent major trauma in their life.

## **The mentor’s role in student change**

The gains for students that we found have been achieved through the quality of the mentors’ work with students. Students who made many changes rated more highly than others their relationship with their mentor and the Check and Connect strategies. These strategies included weekly meetings, setting goals, having feedback from their mentor about their attendance and checking in on attendance.

Mentors found that building the foundations for students to trust them was critical, and that sometimes meant focusing on students’ out-of-school relationships and challenges rather than school attendance at the start of their work with them, or during it. Where students trusted their mentors, they felt able to be their full selves with them, often giving the mentor more information to work with than students’ teachers or parents might have.

Students generally felt their cultural identity was supported in their work with their mentor.

Additional support was gained by mentors for 34 percent of the students, mostly from their schools, and also through their Check and Connect team and its contacts. As well, mentors had helped 36 percent of the students with direct tutoring or homework.

## **Mentor support and training**

Mentors found the general Check and Connect approach worked with almost all their students. In terms of their training, they were most positive about the use of cognitive behaviour theory, check-in and feedback about school attendance, and motivational interviewing. They were least convinced about the value of the Pathways map. The initial training had come too soon for almost half of the mentors, since they were not then working with students, and just under a third thought it had not been clear about the approach. A third did not think the guidelines they had for the programme were clear. They wanted more ongoing training and support.

Generally the mentors’ work has been well supported by having mentors work in teams together, within NGOs that can link to other supports for young people such as mental health, health, and government agencies.

Students were more positive about their work with their mentors when they had mentors who rated their training and support within their team most highly, indicating the value of good training and teams.

It was essential to the students that the mentor was someone they could trust, someone with whom they could speak freely, and someone who behaved and responded differently from the teachers and school counsellors who had ‘growled’ at them or did not have enough time to put the student at the centre of their attention on a regular basis. Since this evaluation does not include Check and Connect provided by schools, we cannot definitively tell from this evaluation whether it is essential that Check and Connect mentors are not school staff. We think the fact that they were not played a useful part in their ability to win the confidence of students who were not comfortable in their schools, and for the mentors to be able to put individual students first.

## **Student ethnicity**

On the whole Māori and Pasifika students had similar views of their relationship with their mentor. There were some differences as to how useful some of the Check and Connect strategies were, with more positive views from Māori students about checking in and feedback from their mentor about their attendance, and goal setting.

## **Matching of student and mentor cultural identity**

Trial sites endeavoured to match student and mentor cultural identity, and could do so for around a third of the Māori students, and half of the Pasifika students (within the broad category of Pasifika). Whether student and mentor were

matched this way did not show any links with student gains from their Check and Connect work, or with whether they felt their mentor respected their cultural identity.

### **Student gender**

While female students were more likely to make many changes as a result of their Check and Connect participation, student views of their relationship with their mentor and the work they did with them did not differ for males and females. Mentors of more female than male students identified the relationship they had with the family, data monitoring, persistence plus, capacity building and engagement with the family as elements of most use to the students. Mentors of more male than female students identified goal setting and plans as of most use. Female students had more additional support that their mentor had gained for them, through their school or NGO site, and more had been helped with direct tutoring or homework.

All but three percent of the students had the same gender as their mentor, so we were not able to analyse whether gender-matching was linked to any differences in student experiences and gains.

### **Prior mentor experience in working with young people**

All the mentors brought experience in working with young people to their Check and Connect role, including recreational, community and school-based programmes, with some having worked as social workers, in health, mental health and drug and alcohol addiction programmes, and other kinds of support and coaching. Because all mentors had some previous experience, and often several different kinds of experience, and because there were only 17 mentors in total, it was not possible to analyse whether mentors needed prior experience working with young people to be effective in their Check and Connect role, or whether one kind of experience might be more useful for this role than others.

### **The school role in student change**

Students whose mentors were most positive about their work with the school were more likely to have made many changes than others.

Mentors worked closely with their students' schools. Most were positive about their relationships with these schools, though issues around accessing behaviour, attendance and NCEA data were experienced, and sometimes difficulty in finding a private space to meet with students. Overall, after some teething problems, the partnership with schools was working well for more than half the students, though there was still more variability than desirable.

It was difficult for the Hawke's Bay site to work as well with Wairoa College as they could with their local schools.

School champions and principals were positive about Check and Connect. School champions had some issues with the time it took to get together the information from teachers and others to nominate a student. Most were satisfied with the contact with and information from the mentors working with their school's students.

Students whose mentors were most positive about their work with the school were more likely to have made many changes than others.

### **The family role in student change**

Parent engagement is an essential component of the Check and Connect framework. Overall, mentors had established good communication and relations and support with students' goals with around 50 to 60 percent of the students' families. While the links with gains for students shows that these are important, it is also evident that they are not essential for students to make many changes. Much depends on what changes are needed, and where the family is positioned, as well as what support is also available from school and friends.

## Partnerships that enable change

A tripartite partnership between mentor, school and family was not essential for a student to make meaningful gains through their Check and Connect participation, although where they existed, and all could communicate well and support a student’s goals, they were effective.

## Recommendations

Like any trial of a new programme, the Check and Connect trial has not been without its teething problems. While some of these have been overcome, there are still a number of issues that need Ministry of Education national level attention and coherence across districts to strengthen the programme.

Our recommendations are that the Ministry of Education:

- Ø leads a national approach to ongoing learning from the Check and Connect sites, through providing regular opportunities to share effective mentor-school partnerships (with the input of schools), what has worked to gain the trust of hard to reach students, and work with them to effect change, effective mentor-parent partnerships, and what has worked with students with different issues at nomination
- Ø provides ongoing training on topics identified by mentors, and on key strategies; initially this could include finding out more about the use of the Pathways map and any issues around it
- Ø simplifies site reporting, and uses the site reports for ongoing national learning to support the efficacy of Check and Connect and inform other work on student engagement
- Ø ensures that schools provide mentors with the electronic access to student data from the school that they need – including NCEA credits as well as attendance and behaviour
- Ø reviews the inclusion of Wairoa College in the Hawke’s Bay site, since it did seem more difficult for mentors to meet student needs where a school is physically distant from their base
- Ø provides a valid, and simple online monitoring of student progress that is consistent across the sites and that can also be pulled together efficiently to provide periodic national pictures of the effectiveness of Check and Connect, and fed into ongoing learning shared with the sites to keep improving practice –
- Ø this is likely to include some work on how schools record attendance and behaviour data to identify differences, and decide what data or categorisation of data is essential, so that analysis is realistic
- Ø provides more coherence and more efficiency for the sites and for itself by having the national responsibility both for the Check and Connect programme and for contracting the NGOs who provide it
- Ø makes Check and Connect available to Year 7 and 8 students to stay with them into Year 9, to provide a bridge for students showing disengagement before they get to secondary school, and support them to make academic progress so that they are better placed for the demands of the secondary curriculum
- Ø continues to provide Check and Connect through the existing NGO sites, making the most of the expertise now present at those sites
- Ø uses the site expertise and the results of this evaluation to decide on provision in other sites that could benefit from Check and Connect
- Ø investigates its interest in seeing if Check and Connect could be provided as well within school sites by:
  - finding out more about the Otaki College use of Check and Connect to see what gains have been made for students, how the team has worked, with a particular focus on the student-mentor relationship and use of strategies, and the particular context of this school’s approach to behaviour and student support

- finding out more about the use of Check and Connect in two West Auckland secondary schools, using RTLBs
- discussing with the schools who have worked with Check and Connect mentors in the existing trial sites their views on the viability and sustainability of providing Check and Connect mentoring in-house, and the support that would be needed if they thought this would be desirable
- discussing with the two Check and Connect programme people visiting Wellington on 12 August what lies behind effective school provision of Check and Connect in the USA, and analysing their identification of enabling factors in terms of the New Zealand school context
- discussing with primary schools and intermediates the support they think they would need to provide Check and Connect in-house if it is extended to Years 7 and 8.

# 1. Introduction – the Check and Connect trials in New Zealand

School qualifications matter more than ever for young people to find satisfying study and work pathways beyond school. But school does not engage all students, and there are strong links between disengagement in school and eventually dropping out of school, leaving without a useful qualification, or finding it difficult to achieve success in ‘second chance’ education after school.<sup>1</sup> Added to this, student engagement levels overall decline between age 10 to age 14 in New Zealand.<sup>2</sup> School engagement is not the only thing to change over this period: the longitudinal Competent Learners’ project also found changes in friendships, activities outside school, and values, which all point to early adolescence being a particularly critical time to support young people. This is an important time to establish productive relationships, habits and motivation in and out of school, since what happens in one sphere often affects the other.<sup>3</sup>

One programme which has had some success in countering student disengagement in school is Check and Connect, which was chosen as one of the initiatives to be funded through the Prime Minister’s Youth Mental Health project in 2012. This followed a review of its suitability for New Zealand students, and some preliminary evidence from a pilot of the programme in Christchurch.

In 2010, the Ministry of Education contracted a review of Check and Connect and another overseas approach to improve student engagement to assess its suitability for New Zealand students, particularly Māori and Pasifika students. This review concluded that Check and Connect had a very good evidence base for its effectiveness with target students. It had strengths in its programme content, and the emphasis on relationships and home-school partnerships. However, it was weak in terms of cultural enhancement. As well as suggesting more support for existing Māori mentoring programmes and other ‘home’-developed approaches and evidence around engaging Māori students, this review suggested piloting an adapted Check and Connect model.<sup>4</sup>

Christchurch Ministry of Education Special Education staff saw Check and Connect as a promising initiative to use in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes. They secured funding from the Christchurch Earthquake Recovery Fund, and began to offer Check and Connect from August 2011. The Christchurch Check and Connect programme aimed “to promote school engagement for Year 8, 9, and 10 students at high risk of school failure” (Check & Connect Christchurch report 1, August 2012). It began with a team of six mentors (including two team leaders), a programme

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<sup>1</sup> Rumberger, R. A. & Rotermund, S. (2012). The relationship between engagement and high school dropout. In Christenson, S.L.; Reschly, A.L., & Wylie, C. *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement*. (pp. 491–514). New York: Springer.

Wylie, C. & Hodgen, E. (2011). *Forming Adulthood. Past, Present and Future in the Experiences and Views of the Competent Learners @ 20*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

<sup>2</sup> Wylie, C., & Hodgen, E. (2012). Trajectories and patterns of student engagement: Evidence from a longitudinal study. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 585–600). New York, NY: Springer.

<sup>3</sup> Wylie, C., Hipkins, R. & Hodgen, E. (2008). On the edge of adulthood: young people’s school and out-of-school experiences at 16. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Wylie, C. & Hodgen, E. (2011). *Forming Adulthood. Past, Present and Future in the Experiences and Views of the Competent Learners @ 20*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

<sup>4</sup> Grennell, Dennis, Pasene, Maria, & Malins, Christine (2010), *An Investigation of the Effectiveness of Check and Connect & Student Success Teachers and their Applicability to the New Zealand Context*.

manager, and clinical supervision from a Ministry of Education educational psychologist. It offered its services to all the Christchurch secondary schools and intermediates, and initially, some primary schools. By the time its funding came to an end in late 2013, it had worked with 107 young people. The available evidence suggests that the Christchurch Check and Connect programme supported quite a number of its participants to positively alter some of their engagement behaviour, attitudes and resilience, resetting their motivation toward learning and school achievement.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Check and Connect programme**

The *Check and Connect* programme originated in the United States.<sup>6</sup> It targets students whose patterns of school attendance and engagement in school work indicate they are at risk of disengaging from learning, and are therefore at risk of leaving school too early. It is a customised intervention. A mentor works with students individually over a period of two years or more. The aim of this intervention is to re-set students’ attitudes to education, and strengthen their resilience so that they engage more in learning and experience success.

The quality of the mentor’s relationship with students and their persistence in working with them are particularly important. Mentors focus on what can be altered with, and for, the student, working with their school and family as appropriate. Depending on individual need, they may also find or broker other support, often through the school. This might include professional mental health attention or new educational options. Mentors are trained and work within a systematic framework, including at least weekly monitoring of school or educational institution attendance (the ‘checking’), which provides data they can discuss with the student in terms of review and goal-setting. Mentors also work as part of a team, sharing knowledge and providing support, and they receive regular supervision.

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<sup>5</sup> Wylie, C. & Dingle, R. (2014). *Check & Connect Christchurch Programme. Participants, Processes and Outcomes. Report to the Ministry of Education*. Wellington: NZCER.

<sup>6</sup> The programme’s research base, evidence of its efficacy with U.S. students, and its framework for mentors is described in Christenson, Sandra L., Stout, K., & Pohl, Angie. (2012). *Check & Connect. A comprehensive student engagement intervention*. Minneapolis: Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota. Check and Connect. This manual was used as the basis for the Check and Connect programme in New Zealand, and given to the trial sites.



Table 1 gives the ten key elements of the Check and Connect programme.

**Table 1 Components and Elements of Fidelity for Check and Connect**

Components	Elements	Description
<b>Mentor</b>	Relationship building	Relationships with students and families are based in mutual trust and open communication and focused on promoting students' educational success.
	Long term commitment	Mentors make a two-year commitment to students and families which may involve following highly mobile youth and families from school to school and program to program within the district.
	Persistence plus	The mentor is a persistent source of academic motivation, familiar with the youth and family (continuity), and provides the message that "education is important for your future" (consistency).
<b>Check</b>	Systematic monitoring	Students' school adjustment, behaviour and education progress are monitored weekly.
	Focus on alterable variables	Data on indicators of disengagement (attendance, grades, behaviour) that can be readily altered are collected and available to mentors.
<b>Connect</b>	Problem solving	A cognitive-behavioural approach is used to promote the acquisition of skills to resolve conflict constructively and encourage the search for solutions rather than a source of blame.
	Capacity building	Mentors foster productive coping, self-regulation, self advocacy skills and social and academic competencies, and diminish dependency on the mentor.
	Personalised data-based intervention	Timely interventions, driven by data are implemented to re-establish and maintain the student's connection to school and learning.
	Promoting participating and affiliation with school	Mentors facilitate student access to and active participation in school-related activities and events, and promote students' identity as learners.
<b>Engagement with families</b>	Connect, partner and engage with parents	The mentor engages with parents and strives to foster the parents' active participation with their child's education. Mentors work to establish a relationship and a routine communication system with families.

Source: Christenson et al, 2012, p. 128.

These elements formed the core of the Check and Connect trials in New Zealand, with the exception that mentors have generally not been able to follow students if they change schools, unless the new school is part of one of the trial sites.

## The development of the Check and Connect trial

Check and Connect in New Zealand is part of the Ministry of Education’s Positive Behaviour for Learning strategy. It is aimed at students in low socio-economic decile secondary schools who are disengaging from school in Years 9 or 10. Many of these students are Māori or Pasifika.

The New Zealand programme is designed as a trial at different sites around the country, contracting NGOs to provide a team of mentors.

### Trial sites

The Auckland site started mid 2013; Hawke’s Bay and Wellington later that year:

- the Auckland site includes eight schools, mostly in South Auckland
- the Wellington site includes five schools, in the Hutt Valley and Porirua<sup>7</sup>
- the Hawke’s Bay site includes four schools in Napier and Hastings, and one in Wairoa.

Other locations showed interest but did not come into the trial because of 2014 budget cuts. Check and Connect has been provided in Horowhenua, by an NGO using its existing social sector trial funding, and at Otaki College, building on existing support it gives to students.

### Shape of the trial site teams

The Christchurch pilot structure contributed to the framing of the Check and Connect team at each site. Each site has:

- a mentor co-ordinator from the NGO (funding for this position was increased after early experience)
- a team of mentors, most employed full time, coming from youth work or related experiences
- a Ministry of Education supervisor with psychological expertise providing professional support to maintain the fidelity or integrity of Check and Connect components, as part of their larger role (they are not based at the NGO).

The NGOs were chosen because they had worked with young people, and had existing Ministry of Social Development contracts to provide social workers in schools.

Each site has a set of schools they work with, and a designated ‘school champion’ or ‘school connector’ at each school, often a senior school leader with pastoral responsibilities, to work with mentors and the site co-ordinator. Mentors usually meet students each week at the school, for an hourly session.

### National support for the trial sites

The Ministry of Education provided mentor training in late 2013 and again in mid-2014. The Ministry of Education also brought co-ordinators, supervisors and NGO managers together in early August 2014 to review progress and identify issues.

Further work was done early in 2015 to clarify the processes involved in delivering Check and Connect in the trial sites. A set of workshops were held to resolve some of the ‘sticking points’ around data collection and its purpose, reporting needs and alignment, and the flow of data from schools to mentors. The Ministry of Education, schools, co-ordinators, supervisors, mentors and evaluators were all involved in these workshops.

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<sup>7</sup> One of these schools did not join Check and Connect until 2015.

Two government agencies have been involved in the Check and Connect trial. The Ministry of Education has had the overall responsibility. Funding to contract NGO providers of mentor teams was given to the Ministry of Social Development. This has added complexity to the trial, particularly in early implementation, with some consequences for site programmes and the evaluation. Ministry of Social Development scheduling to start Check and Connect ran ahead of the work needed to identify adaptations that might be needed for New Zealand, decide the criteria for student eligibility, develop a coherent training programme and support materials and processes, and to ensure schools understood the programme and their role in it. Because it was a trial, it was also important to have consistency between sites in the material collected about students from their start in the programme, and about what sites were doing. However, the large Auckland trial site began before the national framework was well developed, using its own measures as well as a draft nomination form, and the two NGOs who came together to provide Check and Connect at the Auckland site did not allow for the ready sharing of monitoring and evaluation information, in the forms developed by the Ministry of Education for the national trial. Those involved at the trial sites also note duplication of reporting required, but in different formats, adding to workloads.

Difficulties in providing an easy electronic sharing of information, and mid-2014 budget reductions that undercut the national programme also played a part in the complexity experienced by NGO site teams, and a loss of momentum in the national Check and Connect work from mid-2014, including the intention to work with the mentors and sites to share learning to keep improving the programme as a whole.

NZCER analysed available material on the work of the sites and student views and progress from the Hawke’s Bay and Wellington sites in late 2014 to answer the question *How well are the Hawke’s Bay and Wellington sites working?*<sup>8</sup> At that stage, the sites had been operating for 18 months, with around six months development work with mentors and schools needed before the first students were taken on, because this was indeed a trial, rather than a polished programme with its training and processes fully tested. There was evidence that both sites had achieved some changes in student engagement over the 9 to 10 months they had worked with students. It was also clear that the students they worked with included quite a few with deep disengagement with school, and issues beyond school that meant it sometimes took considerable time for trust to be established, and relationships developed that would enable the work on goal setting and problem-solving that is a core strength of the Check and Connect model. Both sites experienced ongoing frustrations in some of their work with schools, particularly in getting data on attendance, behaviour and achievement in time for their weekly work with students. Both sites had also had varying experience in engaging parents and whānau with the Check and Connect work, sometimes finding it counterproductive.

### The role of evaluation

The trial of Check and Connect ran from 2013 to early 2016, with the aim of developing a service delivery model or models by the end of 2015, which would be assessed to decide recommendations for scaling up Check and Connect for national implementation by June 2016. Monitoring and evaluation were intended to play key roles in the development of the service delivery model, as well as assessing the value of Check and Connect for New Zealand students. The overall evaluation approach is described in the next chapter, together with the changes made en route, and a picture of the sources of data and the analysis used for this final report.

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<sup>8</sup> Wylie, C. & Felgate, R. (2015). *Check and Connect in two trial sites*. Report to the Ministry of Education. Wellington: NZCER.



## 2. Evaluation Approach

NZCER prepared an evaluation plan in August 2013, based on existing material on Check and Connect, interviews with the Christchurch pilot team, and discussions with Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Development staff. These discussions included a draft theory of change which we developed to enable us to see what difference Check and Connect made for students, and to understand the role of the various aspects of Check and Connect in the outcomes for students. This theory of change – included at the end of this chapter – was also intended to be used with the site teams and Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Development staff, so that there was a shared understanding of how Check and Connect was intended to work. It has underpinned our evaluation work.

Our role in Check and Connect was envisaged as providing both formative and ‘summative’ evaluation – with the important caveat that the evaluation had to be completed before most of the students would have had the recommended minimal two years on the programme.<sup>9</sup>

### Data collection

In August 2013 it looked as if the trial could include eight sites. We started with a visit to the Christchurch pilot, and analysis of the data they had collected. The evaluation budget could not afford visits to all sites, and so there was quite an emphasis on developing ways to record information that would be useful to both the sites and the evaluation, with the idea that regular discussions together of patterns emerging would be helpful to the ongoing development of the Check and Connect programme in New Zealand. Our role was to include acting as a ‘critical friend’.

Being able to use nomination forms, baseline information about students from the students themselves, some of their teachers, and parents and whānau, and 6-monthly surveys of students, mentors, teachers and parents and whānau, and information from what was planned to be electronic records of student attendance and behaviour appealed as a way to test out an affordable system for ongoing national monitoring of Check and Connect and its effectiveness.

When we focused on two of the sites in late 2014, it was clear that they had struggled with this collection of data for a number of reasons:

- Building relationships of trust was key to the mentors’ work. Surveys could seem like ‘paperwork’ required by people outside that relationship, even if they did provide some useful information to mentors. This was particularly true for their work with parents and whānau, some of whom the mentors thought were deeply distrustful of anything on paper, and some of whom were hard to contact, let alone develop a relationship. Mentors also wanted their relations with schools not to be seen as over-demanding. So mentors could be reluctant to seek baseline information, which would ideally be collected as they started work with students.
- The role of the baseline and survey information was not covered in the 2014 training, and there were no further national workshops bringing together mentors and the Ministry of Education, so the formative role the information and its analysis could play was not visible until the 2015 workshops.
- Mentors were generally frustrated with the work required to provide the Ministry of Education with attendance and other data, and information on student goals and progress through the ‘weekly tracking form’. Getting this

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<sup>9</sup> Christenson, Stout, & Pohl (2012, p. 4).

information from schools required time – only some schools allowed mentors to access their student management systems like KAMAR – and then it had to be re-entered for the Ministry of Education in a process that sometimes lost data. The Ministry of Education had planned for a quick electronic system of data entry and for mentors to receive a monthly overview for their own use (and that could be used in the evaluation), but the system to produce this could not be developed in time. Mentors received back material that was laborious to use – and they did not use it. After the national Check and Connect programme manager left, sites had no feedback on the material they were submitting, so it seemed to them as if it had little value.

Thus when we came to redesign this final piece of evaluation to fit with the fewer number of sites and budget changes, we have used for baseline information only nomination forms, and initial student and teacher surveys – which were not available for all the students who had started Check and Connect before November 2014, who were our focus. Nomination forms from Auckland had some inconsistencies with the forms used by sites that started later.

We have not been able to use attendance and behaviour data over time, as intended. The prime reason is that it is not available in a useable form. When we looked at the weekly tracking forms for two sites in 2014, it was apparent that not all students had the same kind of baseline data (or information over time). It is also apparent to us from this and other projects, and from discussions with school staff and Check and Connect teams that different schools have different criteria for what looks like the same information, eg, what constitutes an authorised absence. Teachers sometimes did not enter attendance data. Mentors told of times when they had arrived at a school to be told the student they were meeting was not at school, when they were. Things may have improved since the early days of Check and Connect however: some of the students interviewed cited their attendance rates before they started and currently to show how much had improved for them – in general terms ‘around 60 percent’ rather than a specific number (eg, ‘65 percent’).

We also designed new surveys that would enable comparison with the baseline data where we had it, as well as giving us overall pictures of what students and mentors thought had changed, and what aspects of Check and Connect were helpful. And we were able to include site visits, to interview mentors as a group, interview site team leaders, and most importantly, interview students. All participants were guaranteed confidentiality. Because student identity was to be kept confidential, we could not send material directly to students. Mentors gave students surveys to complete, and the students sealed them in envelopes before giving them to the mentors to return to us.

For the interviews, we asked the sites to approach students who had made some progress on Check and Connect because we wanted to understand what they thought had made it work for them, and what progress felt like for them. We thanked students interviewed for their time with vouchers (different sites had different preferences between McDonald’s, the Warehouse, or the local mall), and mentors with petrol vouchers. We offered school champions their choice of recent NZCER publications to thank them for their role in getting teachers to complete surveys, and giving us their own perspective.

## Data used in this report

Table 2 shows the data we have used in this final evaluation report. Our main focus was 138 students whom we could identify as having been on Check and Connect with 12 months or more experience on the programme.

Table 2 **Sources of end of 2015 information**

End of 2015 Surveys	Number returned	Number sent out	Response rate (%)
Mentor survey about their role	17	17	100
Mentor survey about students	131	138	96
Student survey	88	138	64
School champion survey	10	17	59
Teacher survey about students	320	414*	77*
Schools returning teacher surveys	13	16	81
Principal survey (online)	6	16	38
<b>Other student data</b>	<b>Records provided</b>		
Student nomination forms	98		
NCEA results up till end of 2015/10	240		
<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Number participating</b>		
Students	19		
Mentors (in site groups)	Most		
Site coordinators	3		
MoE supervisors	1		
<b>NGO reports to Ministry of Social Development</b>	Latest quarterly report		

\* Based on 3 teacher surveys per student. For some students we received only 1 or 2 teacher surveys back.

This report includes material on 131 students from the mentors from their surveys, from the 88 students from their surveys, and on the 50 students for whom we had both (most of) the baseline information and end of 2015 student survey.<sup>11</sup> As a whole, the smaller groups of 88 and 50 are reasonably representative of the 138 Check and Connect participants with 12 months or more experience on the programme that we identified at the end of 2015, in terms of their ethnicity, gender, and year level, with some differences in the reasons for nomination to the Check and Connect programme, and more responses from Year 10 students. So we are confident that the smaller groups are reasonably representative of the Check and Connect participants as a whole.

Table 3 shows the characteristics of the 88 students who completed the end of 2015 student survey, which is the group we have used for much of our analysis. This shows that students who came into Check and Connect before late 2014 were mainly Māori and Pasifika students, with more females than males. It also shows that more students started Check and Connect in their second year of secondary school than their first. This may be because it takes time for student disengagement to manifest itself in a new environment, and for school staff to see a consistent pattern of absence or classroom behaviour.

<sup>10</sup> Supplied by the Ministry of Education in February 2016 using a provisional dataset from NZQA.

<sup>11</sup> Because the Auckland nomination form was different from the other sites, and did not have useable data about initial achievement levels or parental support for their child's learning, the analysis we could undertake on these variables was limited.

**Table 3 Characteristics of students who completed the end of 2015 student survey<sup>12</sup>**

	Number (n=88)	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	40	45
Male	30	34
Not known	18	20
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Māori	39	44
Samoan	9	10
Cook Island Māori	6	7
Tongan	5	6
Other Pacific	4	5
Other	3	3
Not known	20	23
<i>Year level at start of Check and Connect</i>		
Year 9	20	23
Year 10	49	56
Not given	19	22
<i>Time on Check and Connect by the end of 2015</i>		
13–18 months	41	47
19–24 months	24	27
Over 24 months	8	9
Not known	15	17

The aim of this evaluation report is to describe the outcomes achieved for students participating in Check and Connect between 2013 and 2015, for at least one year, with an analysis of factors that might affect different outcomes, such as the length on Check and Connect. The outcomes are derived from the theory of change, and include NCEA level 1. We have used cross-tabulation to understand how outcomes are related to key aspects of the Check and Connect model, and factor analysis to give some sense of how much changed for the students.

The key evaluation questions guiding our work were:

*1. How do students change through their participation in Check and Connect?*

What are the changes in students’:

- i. engagement in education
- ii. sense of cultural identity

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<sup>12</sup> We matched student data from nomination forms to the student survey responses via student NSNs. Missing data is where we do not have the NSN or the NSN given does not match.



- iii. sense of agency, self-control and resilience
- iv. achievement of goals agreed with their mentor
- v. overall achievement levels relative to their classmates
- vi. NCEA achievement.

We analyse whether the kinds of changes made are related to individual students’:

- a. ethnic identity (Māori or Pasifika or other)<sup>13</sup>
- b. gender (female or male)
- c. length of Check and Connect participation
- d. initial level of disengaging from education.

## 2. *What was the mentor’s role in student changes?*

We describe the role played by mentors in student changes, including:

- i. quality of mentor-student relationship
- ii. mentor’s inclusion of and support for the student’s cultural identity in their ways of working with the student
- iii. mentor’s use of Check and Connect strategies and training
- iv. nature of mentor work with the student’s school.

We also aimed to analyse any differences found in the role played by the mentor role in terms of:

- a. support and training they received
- b. matching of student and mentor cultural identity
- c. matching of student and mentor gender
- d. prior mentor experience in working with young people.

## 3. *What was the schools’ role in student change?*

We analyse the changes students make in relationship to what school champions, teachers, principals and mentors report about the involvement of schools in supporting students’ Check and Connect participation, goals and actions, to see what different levels or kinds of school involvement are related to the kinds of changes students made.

## 4. *What was the families’ role in student change?*

We analyse the changes students make in relationship to what students and mentors report about the involvement of families in supporting their Check and Connect goals and actions, to see what different levels or kinds of family role are related to the kinds of changes students made.

## 5. *What was the quality of the partnership across mentor/family/whānau/aiga/school that enabled change?*

We analyse available information on the kinds of partnership across mentor/ family/whānau/aiga/school and how these are related to changes made by students.

In an ideal world, our analysis would use a single and complete national dataset. This is not available with Check and Connect. We had quite a job to reconcile data from the Ministry of Education with data from the sites in relation to the length of time students had been on Check and Connect; and we could not always match mentors or teachers with their students (our link was through student NSNs, so that their identity would remain confidential).

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<sup>13</sup> Almost all students participating in Check and Connect are Māori or Pasifika.

Where numbers have allowed, we have tested for statistical significance, and reported differences that are statistically significant. Where we see clear trends in different outcomes where the group sizes are small and statistical significance is less likely to be able to be detected, we report the trends. Because Check and Connect is a customised programme, and the nomination forms varied in the information they provided, we cannot answer some questions as well as we would like. We do not know, for example, whether those who made just a few changes through Check and Connect started with the hardest behaviours, beliefs, or circumstances to shift, or conversely, had just a few – deep – things to shift.

However, by systematically bringing together quantitative description and analysis with material from interviews and comments made in the survey open-ended questions, we think the chapters that follow provide a useful picture of what has been achieved through the Check and Connect trial, and how. Our conclusion discusses what we found, with some recommendations in relation to the continuation of Check and Connect in New Zealand.

## Theory of Change for Check & Connect New Zealand Trials

**Core assumptions**  
 1. Students at risk of disengaging in education early-mid adolescence can be steered to sufficient engagement in education through relationship with a mentor who:

- a. focuses with them on goal-setting, steps towards goals, **problemsolving** etc in relation to education, and models that in their own behaviour with the student
- b. can leverage better support for the student at school, home (to some extent), other educational or employment opportunities, mental health support, according to individual student need
- c. will work with them for 2 years or more if needed
- d. respects and supports the student's identity, e.g., working to ensure Māori students experience success as Māori

**Alignment**

Government strategies to improve children's & young people's wellbeing, & engagement and gains from learning:  
 Youth Mental Health Project

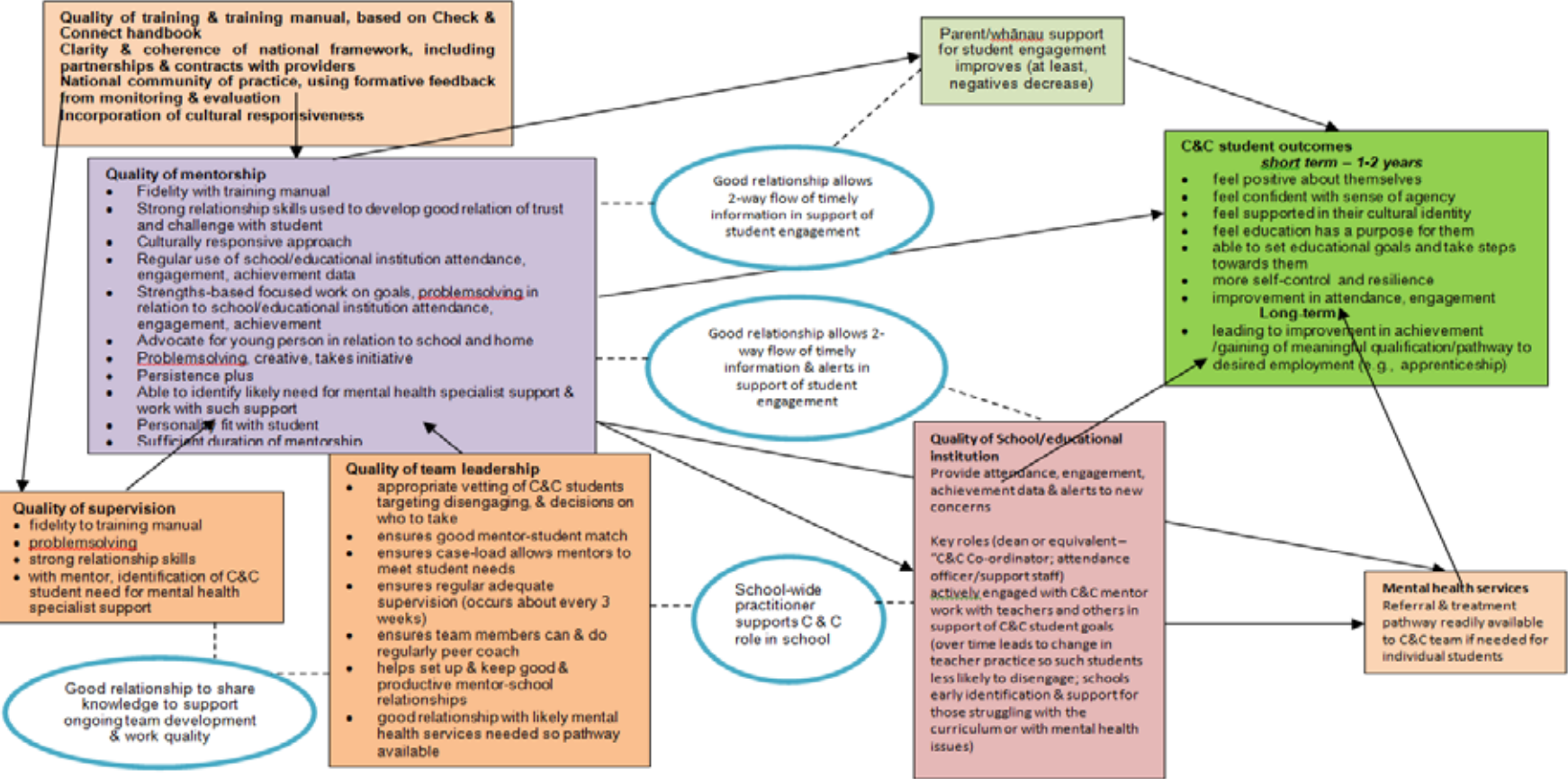
Children's Action Plan

Ka Hikitia Pasifika Education Plan Success for All

Priority learner groups (Māori, Pasifika, students with special need, students from low socio-economic backgrounds)

New Zealand Curriculum (particularly the key competencies)

Better Public Service target: Increased achievement of NCEA Level 2 & NZQF level 4



**PB4L base**  
 Evidence-based & researched strengths-based programmes or systematic approaches whose 'delivery' is consistent with its 'messages' (content)  
 Strong emphasis on building teacher and ege service and school agency (confidence in taking responsibility for shaping the environment promoting positive behaviour rather than seeing behaviour management as largely reactive and limited to consequences)...using ongoing data/evidence based inquiry cycles  
 Strong emphasis on importance of relationships and sharing of knowledge, and co-construction.  
 National teams leading and supporting local delivery through formative quality assurance, information and data sharing, and knowledge-building partnership, rather than line management



### 3. Gains for students

Our picture of the gains experienced by students participating in Check and Connect for at least a year draws on:

- student surveys completed in November and December 2015
- NCEA Level 1 achievement results
- mentor surveys about students completed in November and December 2015
- site interviews with mentors
- school perspectives: teacher surveys about students, and online surveys of school champions and principals completed in November and December 2015
- a comparison of student views at the start of their Check and Connect participation and November and December 2015, using the student surveys
- interviews with students in November and December 2015.

We start with an outline of the issues that brought students onto Check and Connect, followed by the gains students report. Then we turn to NCEA results, for those who undertook NCEA in 2014 or 2015. Mentors' reports of the gains they saw in the students they worked with come next. We note the new challenges that came up for students during their time on Check and Connect, usually outside school, and mentors' thoughts about the students whose needs might lie beyond Check and Connect.

We then compare baseline with end of 2015 reports from 50 of the students about their school engagement, and relations with friends, since these relations have a bearing on school engagement.

Next we report analysis done to convert student and mentor reports into a reasonable ballpark measure of how much changes for students with at least a year's experience on Check and Connect. We used this measure to see whether different patterns of gain are related to the original engagement issues given on the nomination forms, the length of time on Check and Connect, ethnicity, student-mentor ethnic match, or gender.

We conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of the findings.

## Students’ original issues around engagement

Why did schools nominate students for Check and Connect? Table 4 gives the picture available from nomination forms.

Table 4 **Original issues relating to engagement in school**

Issues	Number of students (n=98)	Percentage of students
Absences	48	49
Lateness to class	43	44
Lateness to school	33	34
Not completing classwork	29	30
Behaviour referrals to school office	16	16
Struggling with their schoolwork	12	12
Stand-downs	12	12
Doing the bare minimum to get by	8	8
Detentions	8	8
Passive in class	6	6

The total number of issues relating to engagement in school ranged from one to eight per student. Thirty-seven percent of the students were noted as experiencing one or two issues, 39 percent three or four issues, and 24 percent, five or more issues. In addition, 17 percent had experienced recent major trauma in their lives.

Some of the students had been getting in-school support before their nomination to Check and Connect: 21 percent from a social worker, 20 percent from a guidance counsellor, six percent from an RTLB, and four percent from a school nurse. Four percent had been referred to CYF youth justice services, and three percent to an Attendance Service.

Students who were interviewed gave some vivid descriptions of how they were relating to school before they started Check and Connect. Some simply stayed away, some stopped trying and had lost confidence; some were distracted by other priorities and demands, particularly difficulties at home, or trying to fit in with their peers.

I didn’t really like school that much. Instead of asking for help in maths I just sat there, the teacher was busy, everyone asking for help because they didn’t understand it. My attendance was 75 percent. Teachers growled at me quite a lot.

I sucked at school – the school thought I had potential but the things I was dealing with were throwing me off – I was going down a bad pathway – I knew I was.

In Year 9 I was very quiet, the good girl who sat in front, not a lot of friends. Then I went through a really rebellious stage, not doing work – failing – trying to impress everyone, trying to be someone I’m not – goof off in class, be the class clown, get people to like me.

I was in with the wrong people, thought it was cool to wear colours, ditch school and go into town. I’d tell mum and she wouldn’t even care, so I got away with it. Year 10 I had about three to five months off school, definitely ridiculous.

At the time I was not doing really well at school, quite destructive in classroom, not a wagger, but I was really unsettled in class – sometimes other people make you unsettled, wound up about things, I was winding other people up too.

I wasn't going to class, I was defiant, too aggressive. I just liked to do things on my own. Quite capable, just not applying myself.

Normally if I didn't like a subject I'd wag and ignore the teacher, be really smart to them so they'd kick me out. I was so close to getting kicked out of school.

### Student reports of their gains from Check and Connect

One of our questions in the end of 2015 survey for students was “What's changed for you because you've been in Check and Connect?”

Almost all the students who returned surveys cited some gains from their participation in Check and Connect in the end of 2015 survey. Table 5 shows that these gains are about making more effort and feeling more positive at school, and in achievement – 73 percent said their Check and Connect participation has helped them get better results. The gains are also evident for self-management, communication and managing feelings, and confidence, all of which feed into being more capable at school and able to get more from it. Check and Connect also brought students more support from school, home, and friends.

Table 5 Student reports of changes due to their participation in Check and Connect

Change	Number of students (n=88)	Percentage of students
Better ways to talk about what's happening for me	71	81
More support at school	65	74
I feel more positive about school	65	74
I put more effort into my schoolwork	65	74
Able to organise myself better	64	73
Better results	64	73
I'm more confident about school	64	73
Useful skills in dealing with people	62	71
I have a better sense of my own strengths	60	68
Better ways of dealing with things that used to upset me	58	66
Useful skills in managing my feelings	56	64
More support at home	50	57
More support from friends	49	56

The surveys included room for comments about anything else that had changed in a positive way for students as a result of Check and Connect participation. The main themes here were related to improvements in attendance, in confidence and self-management, including emotions, and seeing school in a new light.

I make myself get to school more and go to my classes.

I went from not wanting to come to school to wanting to have a better future and attending more classes thanks to my mentor.

I have learnt how to set some good goals (short/long) and I have achieved heaps. I know what I want to do when I leave school. I value school and my family more. I know what kinds of people to chill with.

Coming to school on time. Being kinder to others. Participating in school activities. Enjoying school now. Future direction is clearer.

She showed that I had better potential in myself than I knew. She pushed me to getting the better out of me and I am fully grateful for everything she has done for me. She is truly a blessing.

Changed the way I look at school, the way I deal with anger. The way I see myself in the future. It has really helped me get myself together.

All of the students whose description of what they were like at school before Check and Connect we quoted earlier were now engaged, achieving, and emotionally centred, able to make good choices about their relationships with others, about how they reacted, and connecting what they chose to do now with a clearer sense of who they wanted to be. Check and Connect had enabled them to stay in school and make the most of it, enjoying it rather than resenting it or sabotaging themselves. Most of those interviewed saw Check and Connect as a real life-changer. In the next chapter we return to these students to look at their accounts of how the work with mentors changed their perceptions, habits, and skills, allowing such turn around changes.

## **NCEA achievement**

Attainment of NCEA credits had seemed unlikely to quite a few of the students interviewed, who were proud of what they had in fact been able to achieve.

This year – it’s been my best college year, I’ve flown through the roof with NCEA. I’m blown away and so are my teachers, never thought I would ever come this far. I put my head down, if I get kicked out of class every day I’m not able to achieve my goal, achieve NCEA in Year 11. By focusing in class, I made it a positive year for me.

The 48 nomination forms which had usable information from teachers about students’ level of performance showed that most were performing below the general curriculum level for their year before they entered Check and Connect: either struggling to perform at that level (23 students), or achieving it in only some curriculum areas (19 students).

Fifty-seven percent of students on Check and Connect who had been in Year 10 in 2014 achieved NCEA Level 1 (10 percent with Merit). While this is lower than relevant national figures (74 percent of Year 11 students who took part in NCEA Level 1 from decile 1–3 schools gained it in 2014),<sup>14</sup> it should be seen in this context of low prior performance.

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<sup>14</sup> NZQA (2015). Annual Report on NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship Data and Statistics (2014), p. 16. <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/About-us/Publications/stats-reports/ncea-annualreport-2014.pdf>



In addition, 84 percent of those who were in Year 10 in 2014 had met the NCEA Level 1 Literacy and Numeracy requirement; 10 percent had met one requirement; and only six percent had neither.

### **Mentor perspectives**

We have information from the mentors on 96 percent of the students who had been on Check and Connect for more than a year by the end of 2015. We asked them “What’s changed for this student over the time you’ve worked with them?” Changes from their Check and Connect participation were reported for most students, as shown in Table 6. Many improved their self-management skills. Many were re-gearing their views about school, leading to improvements in effort given to schoolwork, attendance and results for around half.

**Table 6 Mentor reports of student changes**

Change	Percentage of students (n=131)
Clearer sense of what they want to do when they leave school	64
Better sense of their own strengths	61
Better at dealing with people	60
Talks more positively about school	60
Better at managing their feelings	58
Making better choices about the subjects they take	56
Gets more support at school	56
Talks more confidently about school	55
Puts more effort into their schoolwork	55
Talks more clearly about what is happening for them	54
Better ways of dealing with things that used to upset them	53
Improved school attendance	49
Improved school results	49
More self-organised	48
More support at home	38
More support from friends	24

On average, students were seen to have made eight of the possible changes we asked about.

## New challenges for students

While many of the Check and Connect students had been able to see things afresh, and change some habits and approaches, their mentors also saw 69 percent having to deal with new challenges while they were on the programme, most of which arose outside school. Table 7 shows these challenges to the students being able to focus on change related to school. This would also have a bearing on what they brought to the mentors to work on together.

**Table 7 Mentor reports of new challenges for students during their time on Check and Connect**

Challenge	Percentage of students (n=131)
Family tensions/crisis/move away from family	24
Family demands or needs	16
Difficulties with friends	14
Loss (of family member, friend)	8
Suicide (usually of peer)	7
Injury/ill health	4
Crime/drugs/alcohol	4
Bad peer group	3

More female than male students were seen by their mentors to have new challenges during their time on Check and Connect, particularly in relation to family tensions, family demands or needs, loss, and difficulties with friends. More male students had new challenges arising from a bad peer group.

More Māori students were seen by their mentors to have new challenges than Pasifika students during their time on Check and Connect, particularly in relation to difficulties with friends, family demands or needs, loss, and also more exposure to suicide. Pasifika students had more injury or ill health.

Because of the small numbers here, these patterns should not be seen as generalisable to females and males, and Māori and Pasifika students as a whole.

## Challenges for the Check and Connect model

Check and Connect mentors had usually worked with one or more students for whom they found the Check and Connect approach not so effective, or requiring a long time before they felt the students could focus on school, or were ready to work on achievable school-related goals. It was also difficult to maintain the weekly school-based sessions when students had very low or irregular attendance.

Mentor comments indicate that such students often had deeper and more complex mental health and social issues than Check and Connect was designed for. Mentors found themselves addressing these issues where they could, often enlisting or seeking other expertise or working with social and government agencies.

Kids with really complex issues at home – it’s very hard for them to engage – when they’re dealing with things that you as an adult would struggle with – we discuss those kids quite a lot – it can be really heartbreaking and hard to hear what they have to go through. If they get yelled at in class you can see why – it’s hard for them to focus, their brain goes a million miles an hour. But you can always do something, start off small, maybe just a goal of making it to two classes a week – we use the [Check and Connect]

programme, it will have some effects, just not as effective as for the kids with at least 60 percent attendance. Still beneficial for them.

### Current teachers' views

We asked teachers in their end of 2015 survey to note any changes in the engagement, academic performance, or other changes over the 2015 academic year for the Check and Connect student in their class. We had 311 responses, covering 107 students who had been in Check and Connect for a year or more. We aggregated the teacher responses for each student.

Forty percent of the students were reported to have improved their engagement in classwork, 34 percent to have improved their academic performance, and 33 percent to have made other improvements. Around a quarter of the students' engagement in classwork was reported as fluctuating, with teachers usually sourcing this to what was happening at home or with their peers. We did not ask teachers what the students' initial level of engagement or academic performance was like at the start of 2015, so it may be that there are students whose levels were already satisfactory then.

### School champion and principal views

Nine of the ten school champions who responded to our end of 2015 survey said student engagement and achievement had improved for some of their Check and Connect participants, eight said student wellbeing had improved for some, and six, that students' cultural identity had been strengthened (two for most of their Check and Connect students, two for some of them). Nine out of ten would recommend Check and Connect to another school.

Four of the six principals responding to our end of 2015 survey thought that the Check and Connect approach had improved their participating students' engagement and wellbeing, and two thought it had strengthened their cultural identity. Others said they did not know. All six would recommend Check and Connect to another school.

### **Comparison of student reports of their engagement at the start of their Check and Connect participation and at the end of 2015**

Comparison of student answers to questions about their engagement in school and learning from their initial time in Check and Connect with their answers at the end of 2015 show some improvements, and also point to some factors affecting student engagement in secondary school that lie beyond Check and Connect. The 50 students for whom we have both surveys were somewhat more likely to be nominated for Check and Connect because they were struggling with their schoolwork (20 percent compared with 12 percent of the larger group of 98), and were thought to be doing the bare minimum to get by (12 percent compared with eight percent of the larger group).

Figure 1 looks at student views of their school work, teachers, and classes. There is improvement in students' belief in the importance of school learning for their future, in taking school seriously, caring that they do their best work, liking to do their homework properly, ability to concentrate on what they do in class, and enjoyment of learning: all things that Check and Connect aims to improve.

There was no change in items relating to relationships with teachers or how students are taught. Levels of feeling bored in class or being comfortable talking to teachers about problems did not change.

There was an increase in those who stopped trying when school work gets really hard, from 50 to 72 percent. Perhaps this shift backwards is related to one of the themes of the discussions with mentors: the frustration felt by students who had been struggling in school (and disengaging as a result) when they lacked the knowledge or practice needed to engage with curriculum material. Encountering these limits often tested the confidence Check and Connect aims to

build. We have information from teachers on only 16 of these students: at the end of 2015, 13 were said to be struggling to perform at the general curriculum level for their year.

**Figure 1 Comparison of student views about school work, teachers and classes at the start of Check and Connect and end of 2015 (n = 50)**

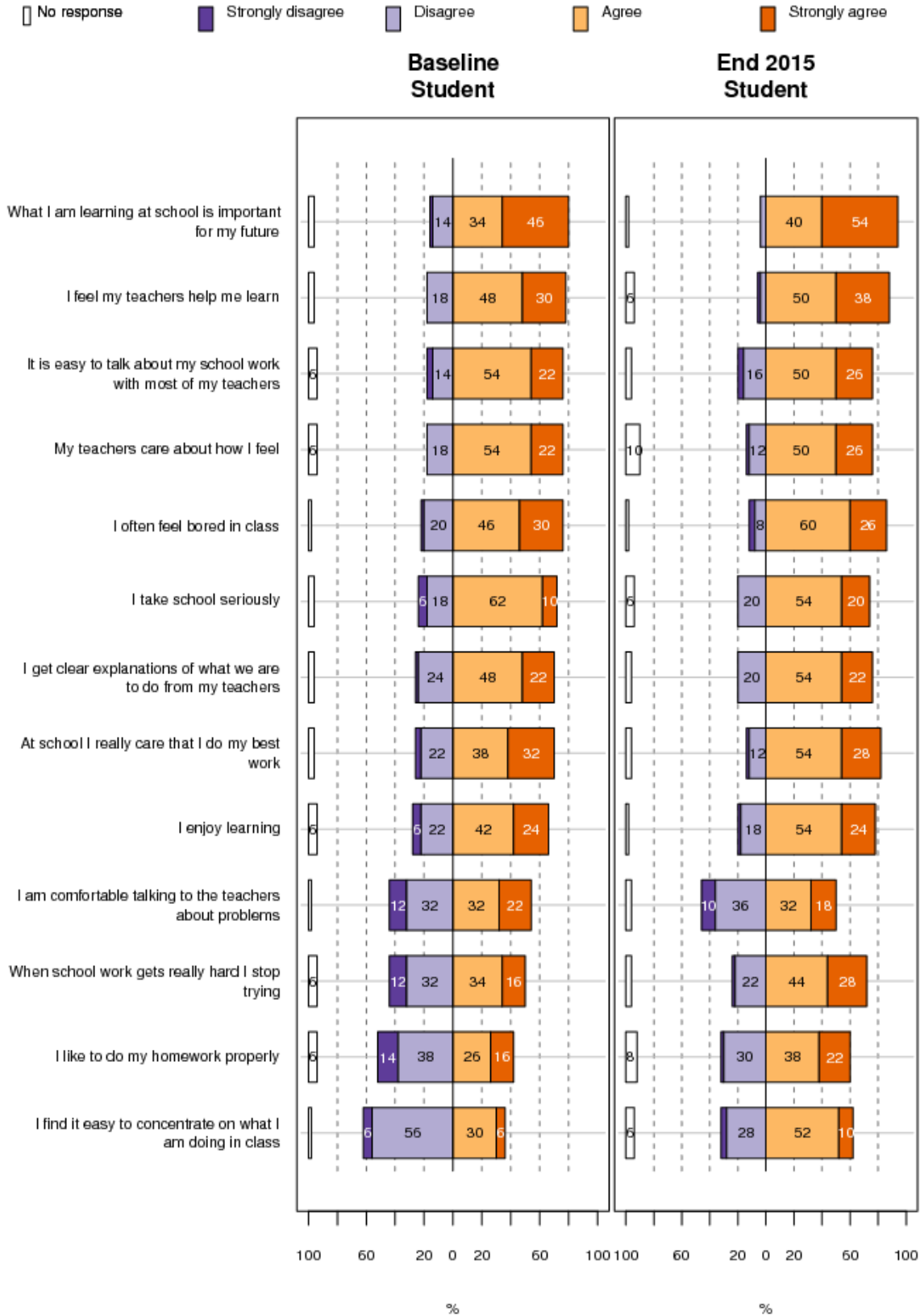
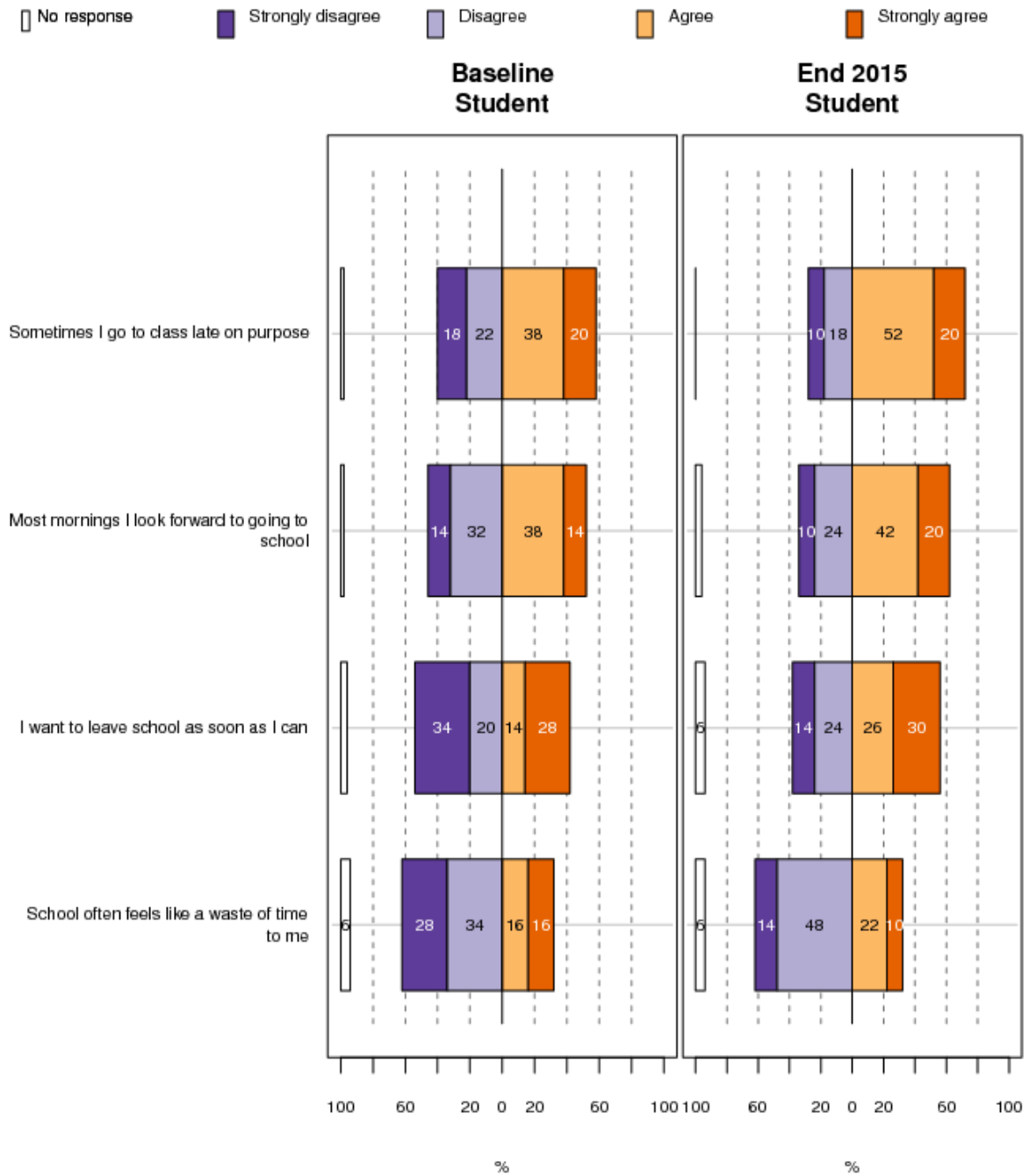


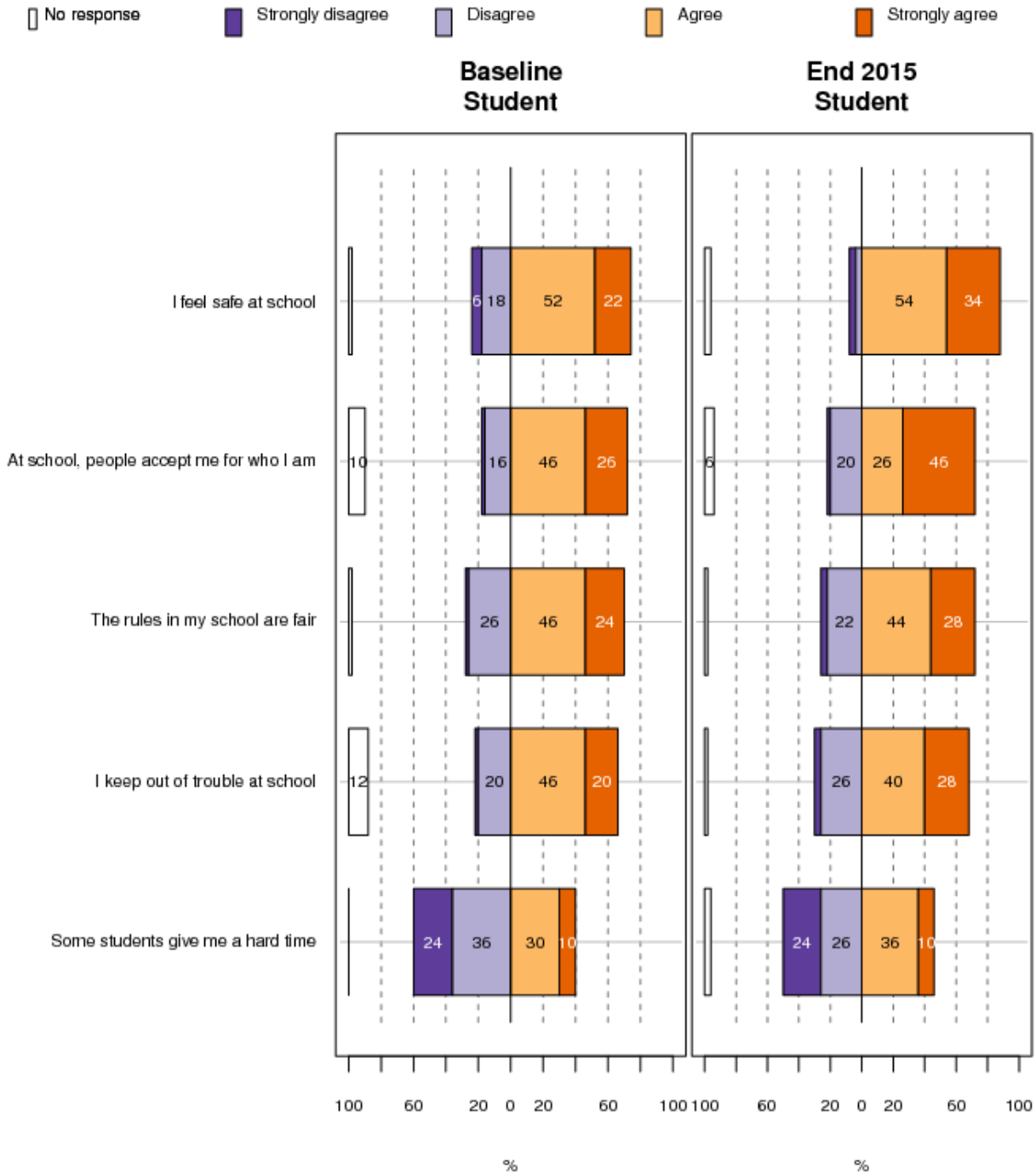
Figure 2 shows an improvement in the proportion of students who look forward to going to school most mornings (from 52 percent agreeing or strongly agreeing to 62 percent), and a decrease in those who strongly agree that school often feels like a waste of time (from 16 percent to 10 percent). But it also shows an increase in those who sometimes go late to school on purpose, and want to leave school as soon as they can. It may be that the end of 2015 survey answers reflect the unstructured end-of-school-year period when students were on study leave for NCEA exams or if not doing NCEA work, finding the normal school timetable and focus disrupted.

**Figure 2 Comparison of student views about school at the start of Check and Connect and end of 2015 (n=50)**



More of these Check and Connect students felt safe at school by the end of 2015, and better accepted for who they were. Figure 3 also shows a slight improvement in those who kept out of trouble at school. There was no change in student perceptions that their school rules were fair, and there was a slight increase in some students giving them a hard time.

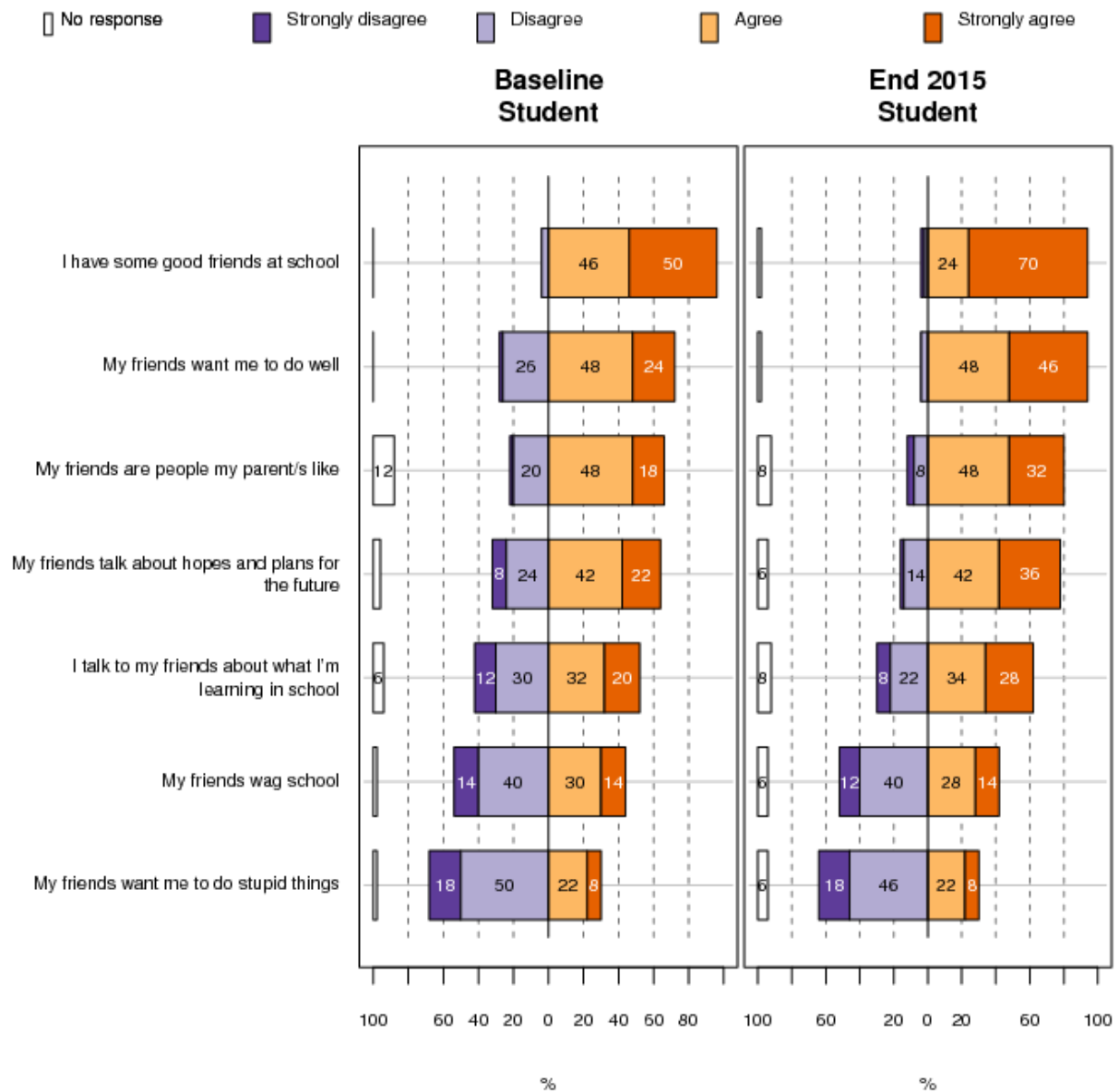
**Figure 3 Comparison of student views of safety and acceptance at their school, start of Check and Connect and end of 2015 (n=50)**



### Friendships

Friends are particularly important for adolescents. Friendships were improved over this period, particularly in having more friends who wanted them to do well, having some good friends at school, who talked about hopes and plans for the future. More of the students were talking to their friends about what they were learning in school. But Figure 4 also shows no change in the proportion who have friends who wag school (42 percent at the end of 2015), or wanted them to do stupid things (30 percent).

**Figure 4 Comparison of student views of their friendships, start of Check and Connect and end of 2015 (n=50)**



More male students had friends who wagged school and wanted them to do stupid things, or who didn't talk about future hopes and plans. They also talked less than the female students about what they were learning in school with their friends.

## How much changes for individual Check and Connect students?

To get some idea of the patterns in student change through their participation in Check and Connect, we undertook factor analysis of the student and mentor responses about changes for students. That yielded three manageable and meaningful groups of items for the students: *Improved school effort and results*, *Improved feelings*, and *Improved support*, and two for the mentors: *Improved school engagement and results* and *Improved support and managing feelings*, which we show in detail below.

We can also use these factors as ways to see how many aspects of change were experienced by students or observed by mentors, to give a ballpark figure for the students as a whole: how many had made no changes, a few changes, some changes, or many changes. One caveat is that while this tells us how many different aspects of the desired outcomes of Check and Connect<sup>15</sup> change for each student, it doesn't tell us to what *degree* they change. For example, we have categorised as 'a few changes' having one to four of the nine items that make up the mentor factor "Improved school engagement and results". But a student could well be categorised as having made only a 'few changes' whose greater self-organisation, more effort put into schoolwork and improved school results saw them achieve NCEA Level when this seemed unlikely to occur a year ago.

We start by describing the factors. Factor analysis of items identifies sets of items which 'hang together' in terms of how individuals respond to them. The 'alpha' score of each factor describes the strength of that cohesion (1 would be a perfect match between the items).

Tables 8 to 10 describe each of the three factors we found among the **student** responses<sup>16</sup> about what had changed for them as a result of their Check and Connect participation, with the names we gave them, and the proportion of students who made no changes, a few changes, some changes, or many changes in relation to the items that comprise the factor.

Table 8 **Improved school effort and results factor (alpha 0.96)<sup>17</sup>**

Questionnaire items	Percentage of students reporting changes
I feel more confident about school	Many changes (6): 40% Some changes (4 to 5): 31% A few changes (1 to 3): 25% No changes: 5%
I put more effort into my schoolwork	
I feel more positive about school	
I've been able to organise myself better	
I've got better results	
I have a better sense of my own strengths	

Change categories may sum to more than 100% due to rounding.

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<sup>15</sup> Items that we asked about were derived from the theory of change given in Appendix 1

<sup>16</sup> Using the 88 students who returned surveys in November-December 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Cronbach's Alpha is a statistical measure of the internal consistency of a set of items: the degree to which scores for one item are similar to scores on another item in the set. An alpha of 1 would indicate uniform consistency.



Table 9 **Improved feelings factor (alpha 0.94)**

Questionnaire items	Percentage of students reporting changes
I've learnt some useful skills in managing my feelings	Many changes (4): 49% Some changes (1 to 3): 40% No changes: 11%
I have better ways of dealing with things that used to upset me	
I've got better ways of talking about what's happening for me	
I've learnt some useful skills in dealing with people	

Table 10 **Improved support factor (alpha 0.86)**

Questionnaire items	Percentage of students reporting changes
I have more support at home	Many changes (3): 40% Some changes (1 to 3): 44% No changes: 16%
I have more support from friends	
I have more support at school	

The somewhat lower alpha for the *Improved support* factor than for the other two factors fits with individual students sometimes finding their changes brought them more support from one or two of these three important sources, but not always all three together.

Overall then, students experienced the most change in how they managed their feelings, and in their skills in dealing with people.

The **mentor** reports of student changes fell into two factors, with the changes in managing feelings and getting more support not distinguished as they were in the student responses. Mentors' observations of student change showed a wider range than the students' reports. Tables 11 to 12 give the details.

Table 11 **Improved school engagement and results factor (alpha 0.93)**

Questionnaire items	Percentage of mentors reporting changes
Has improved their school results	Many changes (8 to 9): 28% Some changes (5 to 7): 28% A few changes (1 to 4): 30% No changes: 14%
Has a clearer sense of what they want to do when they leave school	
Has improved their school attendance	
Puts more effort into their schoolwork	
Talks more confidently about school	
Talks more positively about school	
Has become more self-organised	
Has a better sense of their own strengths	
Is making better choices about subjects they take	

**Table 12 Improved support and managing feelings factor (alpha 0.89)**

Questionnaire items	Percentage of mentors reporting changes
Gets more support from friends	Many changes (6 to 7): 30% Some changes (3 to 5): 38% A few changes (1 to 2): 16% No changes: 17%
Gets more support at school	
Is better at dealing with people	
Is better at managing their feelings	
Has better ways of dealing with things that used to upset them	
Talks more clearly about what's happening for them	
Gets more support at home	

Mentors' observations of the students show that they noticed somewhat more change in how the students managed their feelings to gain more agency in their lives, and more support.

It is interesting to compare the overall patterns of the occurrence of change as a result of student participation in Check and Connect. Table 13 shows that student and mentor responses identify a similar proportion of individuals who made many changes, but differ otherwise. We do not know why: perhaps mentors were focused more on the particular goals they had worked on with students; and students were seeing things more holistically.

Only two percent of students (according to student responses) or 13 percent of students (according to mentors) made no changes in relation to the aspects we asked about in the surveys.

**Table 13 Overall number of student changes as a result of Check and Connect (n=88)**

Students	%	Mentors	%
Many changes	36	Many changes	35
Some changes	53	Some changes	18
A few changes	8	A few changes	34
No changes	2	No changes	13

### Patterns of change in relation to the original reason for nomination to Check and Connect

We used the factors outlined above to see whether there was a relationship between why students were nominated for Check and Connect, and the number of changes they had made through their work in the programme. We could do this analysis for most of the 88 students for whom we had this information both from their nomination forms, and the end-of-year surveys. There were four original issues we could analyse because there were sufficient numbers of students with each issue (each covered 15 or more students).

We found that students who were nominated because of concerns with their completion of or difficulty with school work or with behaviour, or who had experienced a recent major trauma, were more likely than those nominated because of truancy or lateness to be in the 'many positive changes' category on the two mentor factors.

A different pattern was found with the three student factors. Those who came to Check and Connect with identified behaviour issues or recent major trauma were more likely than others to be in the "many positive changes" category for the *Improved feelings* factor (which is consistent with student stories told in the interviews).

Overall there are no clear relations apparent from this analysis between how much change a student makes within 12 to 24 months experience of Check and Connect and the reason why their school nominated them to the programme. We note that most students had more than one nomination reason given – so the categories are not clearly distinct, that the available evidence around original reason for nomination is limited, and that because of the small numbers, the patterns we saw were not statistically significant.

### Patterns of change in relation to time in Check and Connect<sup>18</sup>

Students who had been on Check and Connect for 19 to 24 months were more likely to be in the ‘many changes’ category for the two mentor factors, and for the two student factors *Improved school effort and results* and *Improved support* than those who had been on the programme for 13 to 18 months, or those who had been on it for longer. With the other student factor, *Improved feelings*, those who had been on the programme for 13 to 18 months were less likely to be in the ‘many changes’ category than those who had been on for longer.<sup>19</sup>

This pattern generally backs the Check and Connect model emphasis on staying with students for two years. Overall, the gains for students are much stronger for those who have had close to the two year recommended period on Check and Connect than those with less, as this comparison in Table 14 shows:

Table 14 ‘Many student changes’ and length of time on Check and Connect

19 to 24 months experience on Check and Connect (n= 24)	%	13 to 18 months experience on Check and Connect (n = 41)	%
<i>Mentor</i>		<i>Mentor</i>	
Improved school engagement and results	29	Improved school engagement and results	20
Improved support and managing feelings	46	Improved support and managing feelings	22
<i>Student</i>		<i>Student</i>	
Improved school effort and results	46	Improved school effort and results	34
Improved feelings	67	Improved feelings	39
Improved support	54	Improved support	34

One question this material raises is why we don’t see higher gains for students who were on the programme for longer than two years. We note that this is a small number – only eight – so the pattern here might not be found with a larger group. We wonder if their gains might reflect their coming onto the programme in its very early days; or might reflect continuing challenges that have kept them in the programme beyond the two years that Ministry of Social Development have funded.

<sup>18</sup> We could do this analysis for 73 students.

<sup>19</sup> The pattern is clear, but given the small numbers in each group, not statistically significant.

### Patterns of change in relation to student ethnicity<sup>20</sup>

Because most of the students in Check and Connect are Māori or Pasifika, we compared only these two ethnic groupings. We found that while there were similar proportions in each group that made (just) a few changes, Māori students were more likely to be in the ‘many changes’ category for the two mentor factors, but not for the three student factors.

### Patterns of change in relation to student gender<sup>21</sup>

Female students were more likely than male students to be in the ‘many changes’ category for both the mentor factors, and the three student factors.

In the next chapter, we analyse what mentors and students report about their work on Check and Connect in relation to gender and ethnicity to see if we can identify any differences that might be related to the patterns reported here.

## Summary

Most of the students on Check and Connect have made changes of the kind sought by the programme, according to their reports. Just over a third have made substantial changes, in a lot of the areas addressed by Check and Connect. Substantial change is more likely to be reported by students who have had more than 18 months on the programme, underscoring the time that is needed for real gains.

Most of the students who participated in NCEA Level 1 work gained their literacy and numeracy standards, and 57 percent NCEA Level 1. That is higher than one might expect, given the generally low levels of academic performance before students entered the programme. Achievement of NCEA credits or the whole qualification when they had not expected to do so a year or so earlier was a feature in the student interviews.

Student survey comments and interview accounts also point to real gains in engagement in learning, seeing school in a more positive light as enabling a desired future, and in confidence, control over feelings, and more agency at school, with friends, and at home.

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<sup>20</sup> We could do this analysis for 63 students, 39 of whom were Māori, and 24 Pasifika.

<sup>21</sup> We could do this analysis for 70 students, 40 of whom were female, and 30 male.

## 4. The mentor role in student change

The effectiveness of the Check and Connect trials is reliant on the capability of mentors to build trusting relationships with adolescents and then work within those relationships to support students to make changes that engage them in school and allow them to achieve, and that give them a better resilience and sense of agency.

We start this chapter by looking at mentor capability: who the mentors are and the experience they brought to their work, the support they have within their trial sites, and their views of the Check and Connect framework and the national training they received. We use information from the end of 2015 mentor survey about their role, and from the focus groups with mentors at each of the three trial sites.

Next we turn to what students and mentors said about their relationships, and the work they did together. We touch briefly on the exiting of students, then we look at whether the mentor-student relationship and work they did together is associated with:

- any differences in mentor views of their support and training
- student ethnicity
- the matching of student and mentor cultural identity
- gender.

Our evaluation plan for this final report also included looking at whether this key relationship and work were affected by the matching of student and mentor gender, and prior mentor experience working with young people. However, only three percent of the students had a mentor of a different gender, and all the mentors had prior experience of working with young people, half in three or more different roles. While there were differences in the nature of that experience, the number of mentors (17) is too low for meaningful comparisons.

Finally, we turn to see whether the number of changes made by students is associated with differences in the mentor-student relationship and work they did together. This analysis uses the mentor and student factors described in the previous chapter.

### **Who are the mentors?**

The 17 mentors brought previous experience working with young people to their Check and Connect role. Eleven had experience in recreational programmes, eight in community programmes, six in school-based programmes, three in health promotion programmes, two in addiction programmes, two in school-based social work, and one was a registered teacher. Other experience included youth residential facilities, counselling and coaching, church work, mental health support, and alternative education. The site focus groups and mentor comments in the surveys showed real interest in the adolescents they worked with, conveying a basic respect as well as enjoyment.

In terms of their own characteristics:

- 9 had a postgraduate degree or diploma, and 9 a bachelor’s degree.
- 9 were Pākehā, 7 were Pasifika, and 3 were Māori, with 1 with other ethnicity.
- 9 were female, and 8 male.

They had spent from five months to 32 months in their Check and Connect role, with a median of 22 months experience.

The number of students they were working with at the end of 2015 ranged from eight to 15, with a median of 11.5.

The number of schools they worked with ranged from two to five, with a median of three schools. All but one of the 17 mentors worked full time on Check and Connect.

Mentors had worked with the students who had been on Check and Connect for at least a year for a median of 12 months, and a range from one month to 25 months.

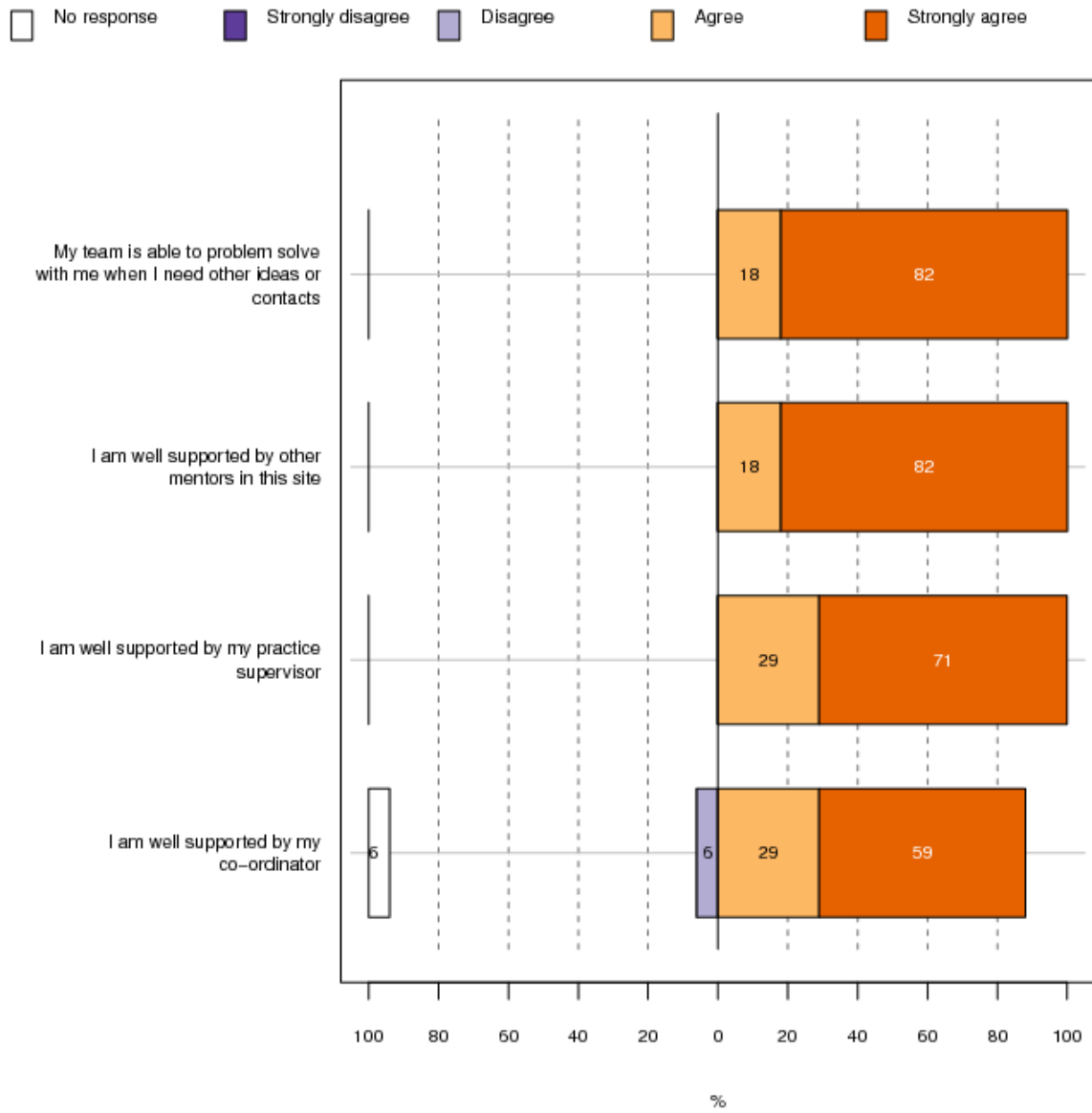
### **Site support for the mentoring role**

Mentors work as part of teams, with regular meetings to discuss what they are doing and jointly problem-solve. They also co-ordinate their school visits, particularly where schools have limited room for mentors to meet with students, and to try to make the best use of site car pools (mentors also use their own cars). Each of the teams had their own room within their NGO, which allowed informal ongoing communication and support and the development of team camaraderie.

We get on so well and we can be honest with each other – it’s like family here. Good that we can vent frustrations, because sometimes it’s pretty hard going.

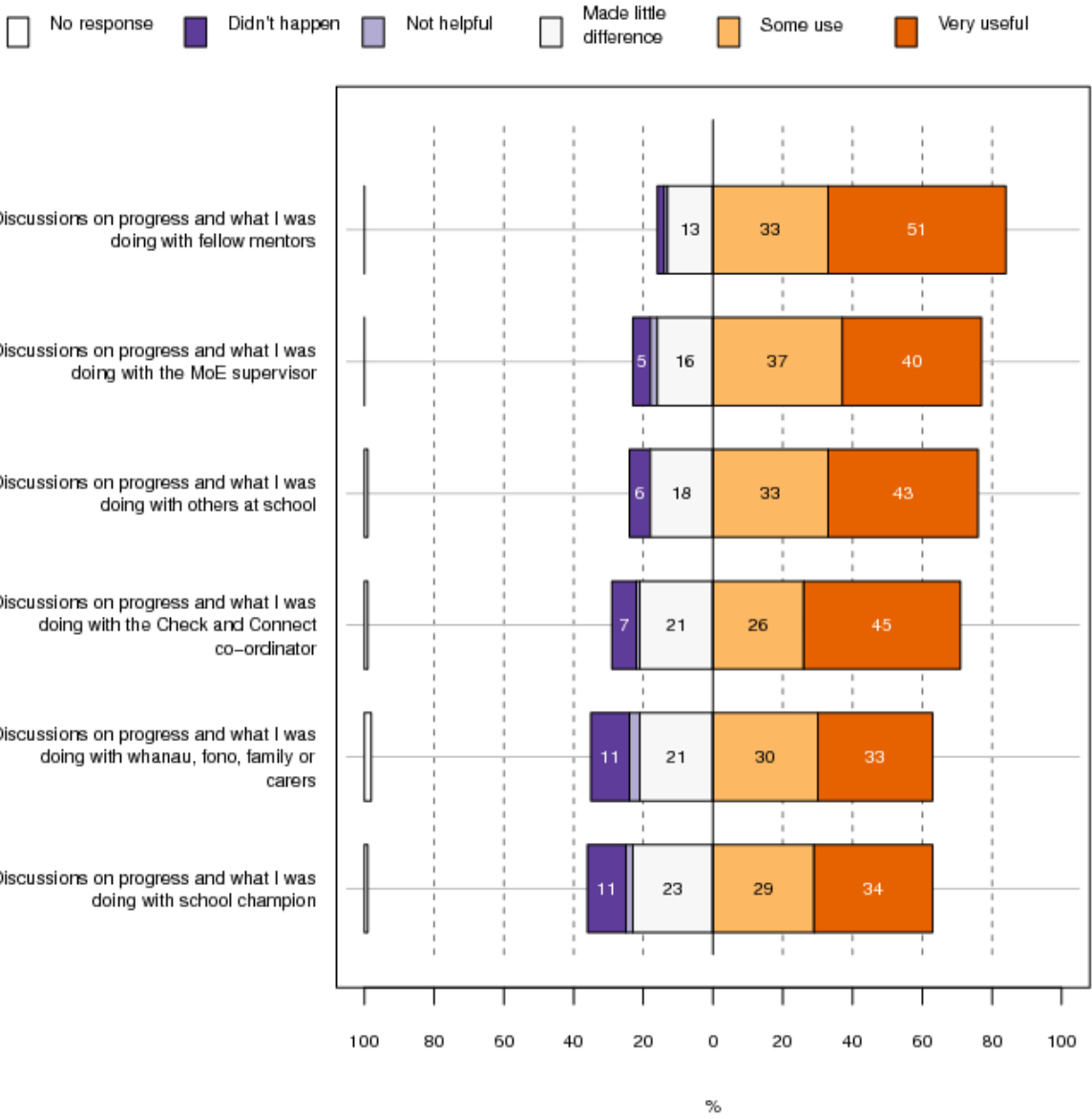
The majority of mentors felt well supported by their fellow mentors, followed by their Ministry of Education practice supervisor, and their site co-ordinator, as shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5 Mentors' views of their site support (n= 17)**



Mentors often discussed individual students’ progress and what they were doing with the students to support them with others, both within their site team, and with the student’s school and whānau, fono, family or carers. Most who did so found such discussions useful, particularly those with fellow mentors, people at the school, and their team co-ordinator, as shown in Figure 6 below.

**Figure 6 Usefulness of discussions with others about individual student progress (n =131)**



Discussions on the progress of individual students with their Check and Connect team co-ordinator took place

- on a regular basis often for 21 percent of the students
- in response to challenges in the work often for 27 percent of the students
- sometimes for 39 percent of the students, and
- rarely or never for 11 percent of the students.

This pattern gives some indication of the spread of challenges with the students, with close to half often needing discussion with Check and Connect team co-ordinators.



Mentors also sought to access specialist services and learning and career-related experiences for individual students. Most of their efforts succeeded. Through *schools*, they accessed health services for 12 percent of the students, grief counselling for 11 percent, specialist mental health services for nine percent, and drug and alcohol services for five percent. For another 19 percent of students they had secured careers and guidance counselling, inclusion in Gateway programmes, referrals to RTLB, learning support, or tutoring, and anger management programmes. This additional support covered 33 percent of the Check and Connect students.

Through their *Check and Connect team and its contacts* they had accessed health services, grief counselling, specialist mental health and drug and alcohol services for around six percent of the students each; and for another six percent, anger management, career guidance and visits to tertiary institutions (some of the latter using mentors' own time and money). This additional support covered 12 percent of the Check and Connect students.

Access to specialist services and learning support through either schools or through the Check and Connect teams was sought for a total of 34 percent of the Check and Connect students. Up to eight different supports were accessed for two of the students.

As well, mentors had helped 36 percent of the students with direct tutoring or with their homework.

### **Mentors' view of the Check and Connect approach and their training**

All the mentors were positive about the difference the Check and Connect approach as a whole had made for the students they worked with.

Figure 7 shows that they were largely positive about the use of cognitive behaviour theory, and motivational interviewing, on which most had training in 2014, and one team again in 2015 following some changes in its team. The training programme was organised by the Ministry of Education national office. It used one of the Christchurch pilot team leaders, which meant that the mentors could discuss actual Check and Connect programme situations, making the training more effective.

Check-in and feedback on school behaviour and on school attendance did not work well for 24 percent and 12 percent of the mentors respectively. This may be linked to issues with getting the relevant information from schools in time, which we explore in the next chapter. It may also be linked with experiences of the time needed with some students to develop the relations of trust needed, sometimes through working with and for them on family or peer issues that engulfed individual student attention.

Almost half the mentors thought their initial training had occurred when they could not make best use of it (most sites had not got their students at this time) and 30 percent thought that this initial training was not clear about the Check and Connect approach. The trial nature of Check and Connect in New Zealand has a bearing on these experiences of initial training, and may also lie behind the comparatively high proportion of mentors who did not find the guidelines clear or useful. It may also reflect their experience that students sometimes did not want to talk about their attendance or goals, and that letting them not do so had proven useful: that addressing attendance and engagement overtly in every session was not always essential to making progress.

If they're crying, a distressing home environment, you have got to work with that first. We can put a pause on Check and Connect and do all the connecting stuff, bring it back to checking in a month say, we have the flexibility to put it on pause if that's what they need. And we've seen that that's worked later down the track.

It took a good six months before we had that relationship where he could set goals.

Another grey area for some had been the balance of attention to students and building relationships with parents.

Mentors' comments in the focus group sessions indicated some questions about the scope of their work and the leeway they had that were sometimes hard to resolve in the absence of ongoing work with a national programme manager or with the other trial sites.

Some variation was evident between sites in relation to seeing students away from school (quite a few continued to see students during holidays as well), and arranging activities and shared lunches that brought Check and Connect students together. These away-from-school activities worked well for those who felt free to do them, though they raised the question of additional costs.

The high proportion who did not find the Pathway map useful suggests the need to investigate more how mentors are using this map, and what kind of support or training might be needed to make this map more useful in the Check and Connect work (or whether other framing might be more useful).

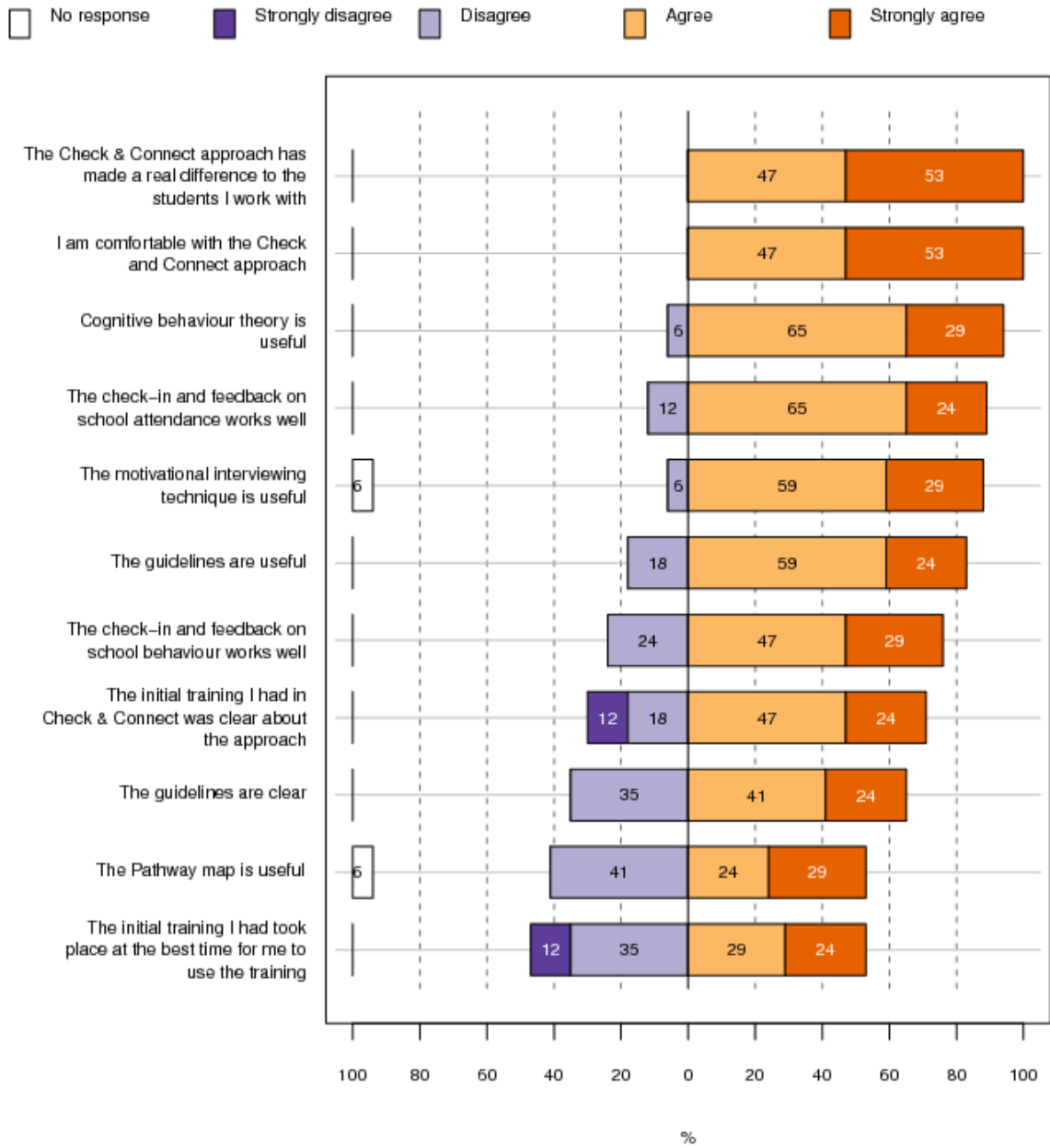
We asked mentors in the survey about their role to identify the training and support they thought essential to do their role well.

Comments here mainly addressed topics that mentors were grappling with, or felt would help them understand their students better, rather than looking back to what they had had. There was a desire for ongoing training for mentors. Some had gained from professional development offered by their NGO generally, or through school staff inviting them to attend sessions.

Quite a range of topics was identified, including the latest research on adolescent brain function and development, cultural awareness, how to use school Student Management Systems like KAMAR, NCEA, more on strategies for managing feelings, on working effectively with hard-to-engage parents, conflict resolution, mental health issues that could affect student behaviour, and suicide and self-harming.

Some mentors emphasised the value of learning across sites, having the opportunity to regularly learn from other mentors, using 'real life examples'.

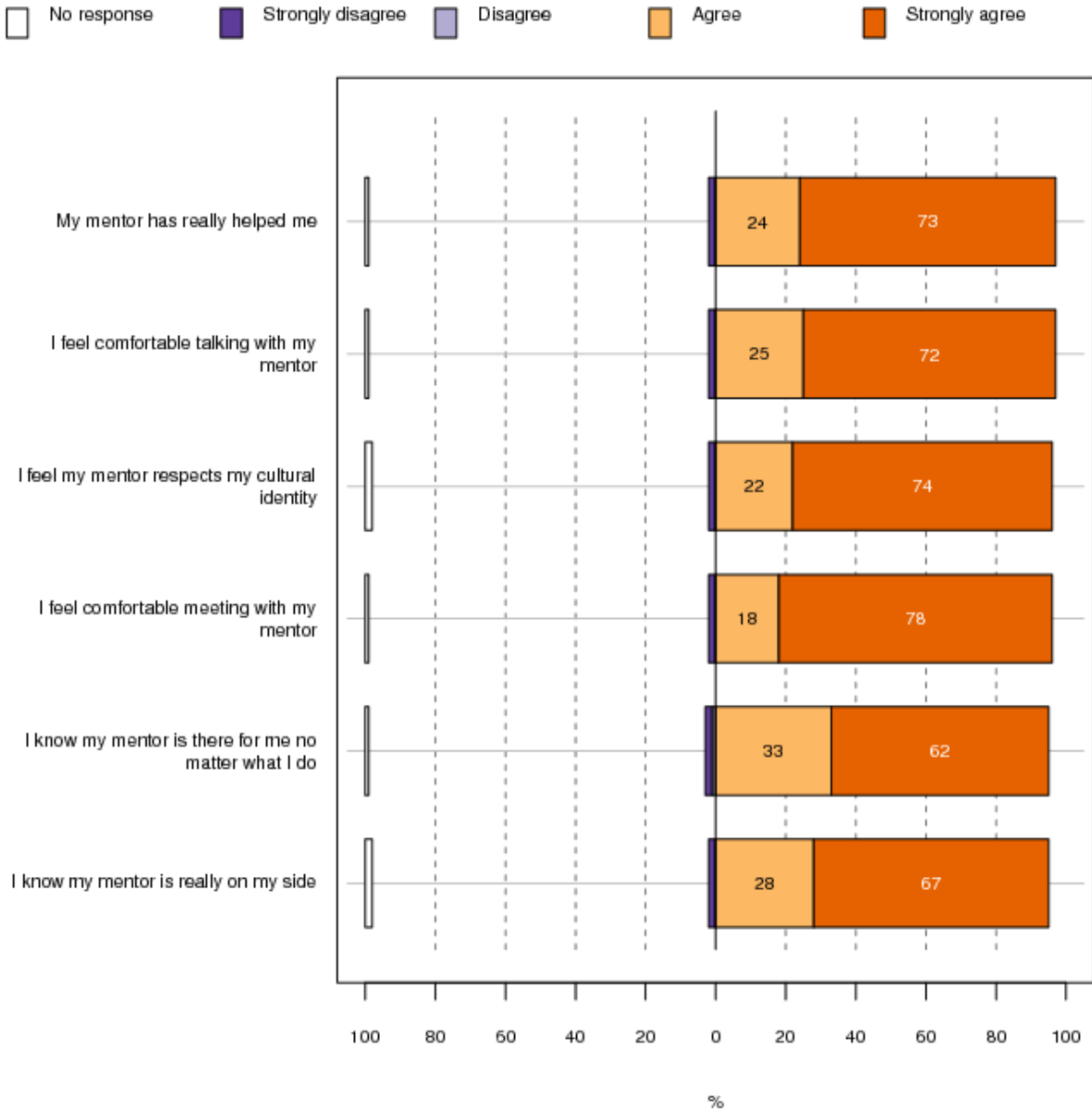
**Figure 7 Mentors’ views of their role (n=17)**



### Student views of their work with mentors

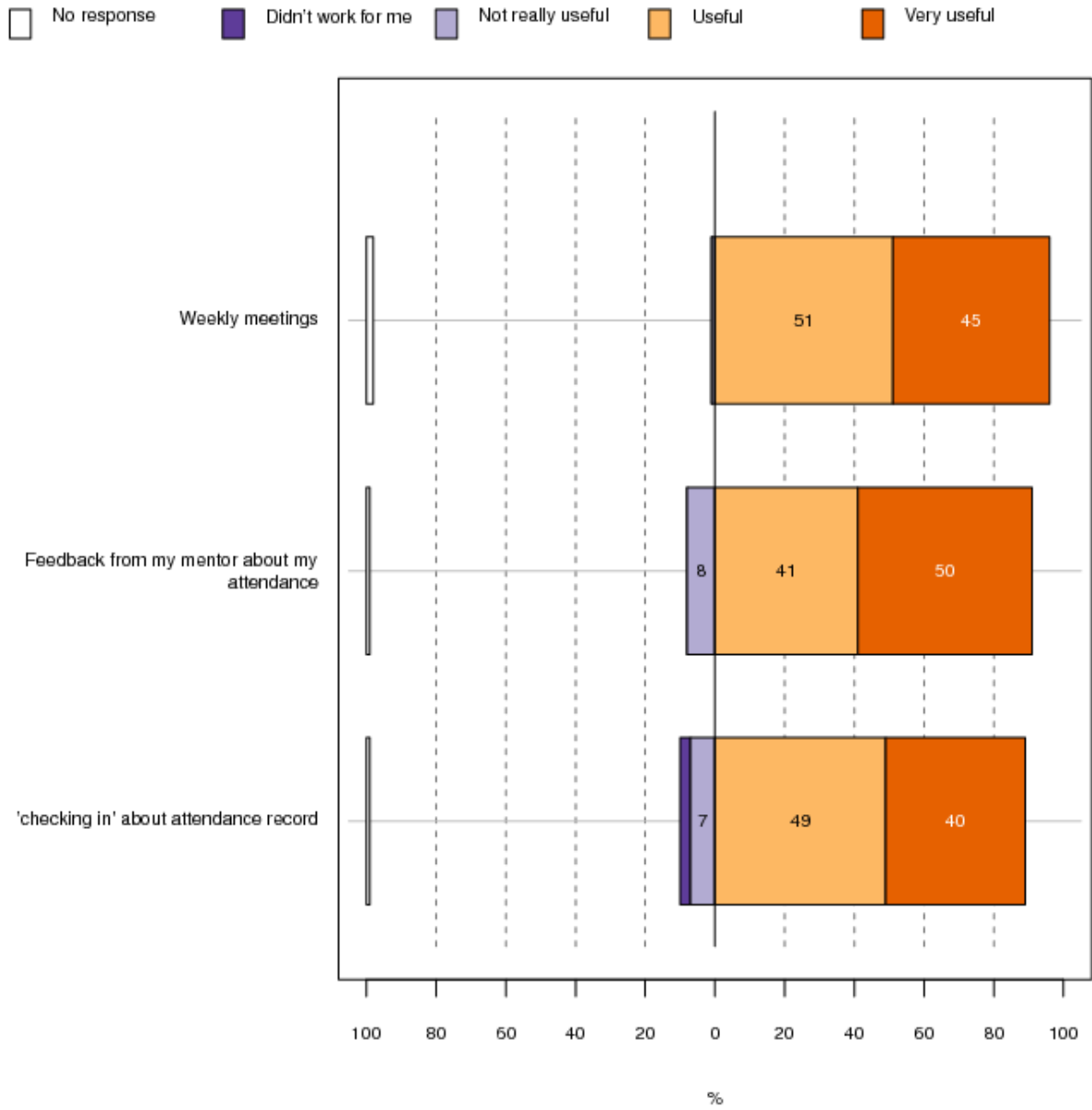
Students were very positive about their relationship with their mentors. The majority strongly agreed that they were comfortable meeting and talking with their mentor, trusted them (knew they were there for them no matter what they did, and that they were really on their side), felt their cultural identity was respected, and felt their mentor had really helped them. Figure 8 shows the details.

**Figure 8 Student views of their relationship with their mentor (n=88)**



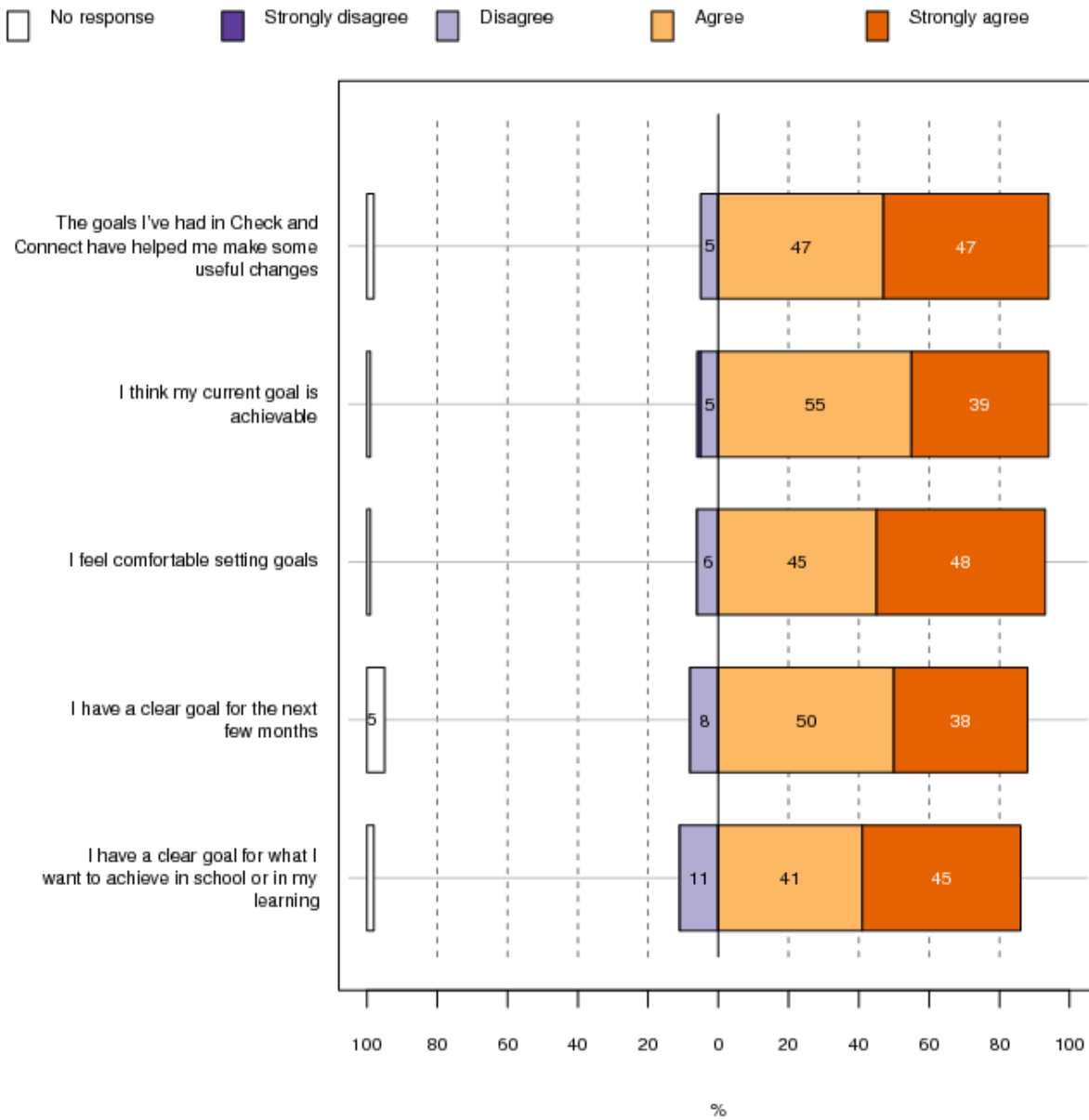
What did students make of the checking processes that are central to Check and Connect? Figure 9 shows that almost all the students found the checking in processes of Check and Connect useful, around half of them very useful.

**Figure 9 Student views of the checking processes in Check and Connect (n=88)**



Goal-setting is also core in Check and Connect. Students were also generally positive about this, as shown in Figure 10. Some students however lacked a clear goal for the next few months or for what they wanted to achieve in school or their learning – perhaps linked to our surveying them at the end of the school year.

**Figure 10 Student views of Goal Setting (n=88)**



In the survey, we asked the students what worked best for them in Check and Connect, and coded their comments.

Mentors and the relationship they had with them were key: mentioned by 44 percent of the students.<sup>22</sup>

Having someone who listens to me and knows how to talk to young people

Being able to open up to someone who I trust. Being able to have someone understand what I go through with teachers.

When the times are hard he is there to help me out with all my problems, and he has taken me out and made things a lot more enjoyable and I'm learning new skills for different situations.

I think the things that worked best for me were seeing someone that I could talk to every week and her checking on my progress and helping me through things I found hard and she motivated me all the time.

Having a mentor who was caring who also was involved with my whānau. Having a strong support system, who helped me with my schooling, social skills, goals, future direction, health, family etc. Someone who focuses solely on you! They listen, they do all that they can.

Regular checking around goals was mentioned by 27 percent.

When they would come in and check up on me and see how I'm doing. They would check if I passed my goals and I usually did.

The weekly visits and seeing where I was standing with achieving my goal.

Meeting every week, knowing that someone is always there for me and making sure I'm on track.

Work around feelings was mentioned by 14 percent.

Talking to my mentor and sorting out stuff that makes me mad easily.

Quite often these themes came together, as seen with the comments below.

I got to release a lot of closed up things and got a lot of work done this year. Also getting me to places I've been reaching for and achieving a lot of goals.

I'm at the edge of passing NCEA Level 1! Having a close relationship with my mentor. She's like a sister I've never had. Setting and achieving goals. Telling all my personal stuff and helping me through it.

Weekly sessions. Having someone listening and letting me 'take the wheel'. Setting goals and achieving them. Helping me in my dark times. Instilled leadership qualities in me that I am using in school.

The interviews with students gave some further examples of why Check and Connect had worked for them, showing that mentors had succeeded in gaining their trust so that the students could speak of what was difficult for them, in and out of school, often things they had kept to themselves, thus laying the ground for change, and for gradually building successful experiences of achievement and doing things differently.

She's really trustworthy. She treated me like not just some weird crazy student she was trying to make better, she treated me like I was someone, I was important and could achieve in life, and we did goals and goal

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<sup>22</sup> 68 students made a comment here.

plans. We set goals like better relationships – now I get on with mum and we’re really close now; and to be good in class, and I’ve achieved that – I do my work, I don’t get distracted, I don’t talk back to teachers – I have a better relationship with them, I really like school – well, not maths but I’m still good in maths!

She taught me lot about how to organise myself and communicate with teachers to do well. She pushes the teachers about what I need to do, and the teachers push me further.

Several who had also been to school counsellors or guidance teachers found the Check and Connect mentor more effective because of this much closer relationship, in which they could talk of things beyond school as well as things in school, and the sense they had that the mentor was open, sharing things from their own life as well, and on their side, able to stay there over time, and give guidance without it seeming like a judgement or formula.

With Check and Connect you can talk to someone about what’s going on, he helps me overcome whatever I’m facing – if I’m in class and have an argument with the teacher, he’s saying, “you better go and resolve that situation sooner and apologise than leave it carry on, make it worse”. I very much needed that guidance. If you go to the guidance teacher – they deal with so many people, can’t really build a proper relationship with the guidance teacher. With Check and Connect you actually go out with the person, build that trust, relationship. They know your whole situation, they carry you through school, it pays off in the end.

She taught me how to not take s\*\*\* from people, to understand what I deserve and not put up with people treating me less than that. She taught me how to remove emotions from the situation, do I see it going anywhere positive? and if I don’t, remove myself. She’s built up my confidence heaps. She’s amazing.

He even came to my house when I didn’t turn up to a meeting. That was a big step – showed he actually cared about me and my education – so I thought I’m not going to let him down. I’ve had social workers trying to change me, but he made it my choice. Being able to talk to him, I could just say anything, he just sits there and helps me with it – life changing. I actually haven’t had a fight since I’ve been in Check and Connect because he put me off – showed me other ways. I wanted to do a hospitality course, leave school, and he took me to the course, the people there told me if it was their choice they would have stayed in school, so that made me think I had a chance and I would do what I could to get NCEA and stay in school.

I can let my guard down more, I know I’m not talking to someone who has jack experience of what I’m going through. Not like counsellors who are really uptight, who are doing it all to report back to someone, find out something. She’s doing it to help me.

She’s never put me down if I failed – she picks me up, stops me putting myself down. I feel like I’m wanted in Check and Connect, they’re behind my back, pushing me up: I can actually do this!

This didn’t mean that the mentors did not give warnings: but that the relationship with a student allowed these warnings to give a direction that students had found hard to take from teachers or counsellors.

This programme is based around school, but how she helped me at home was talking it through, and looking at that situation differently, and telling me if I want to be like that, keep not going to school, not listening to teachers, you’ll end up like your mum. She definitely helped me. And able to talk it through, really helped because I wasn’t bottling it up. She’s been the support and the adult guidance I needed at that time.

With attendance she told me to go to class – even if I really had trouble staying in focus or getting on with teachers, even if I don’t feel like doing anything, I should still go to class because in the long-term I want to study further and I won’t be able to do that if I’m not in class most of the time. Wasn’t like a big thing – you



do this or this will happen – it was – you should do this because it’s going to help you in the long term. She’s given me the encouragement for it.

Mentors also used rewards, tokens of achievement. These varied from chocolate bars in the initial stages, to lunch, sometimes as a group of Check and Connect students, and in one site, to group activities like Paintball. Lunch and the group activities particularly spurred the students on to achieve their goals. As well as recognition or celebration, the group activities gave opportunities to bolster confidence, social skills, and create or deepen students’ social links and ability to support one another. Group activities did not appeal to some students, but were definitely attractive to others.

In the survey we asked the students if there was anything they didn’t like about Check and Connect, that didn’t work for them. Just 11 students identified something: not liking being taken out of class for the weekly sessions, if they were engaged, or preparing for exams – (an irony that the mentors also talked about as sometimes an issue); wanting to be able to have sessions away from school, within activities; or not liking the checking and goal setting – one student said: “At the beginning I disliked checking my credits and attendance because it was really low.”

Some of the students we interviewed would like more scope for work with mentors outside the school, like going with them to see what tertiary institutions or work they were interested in looked like. Some were not looking forward to the end of their relationship with the mentor, when their two years came to an end.

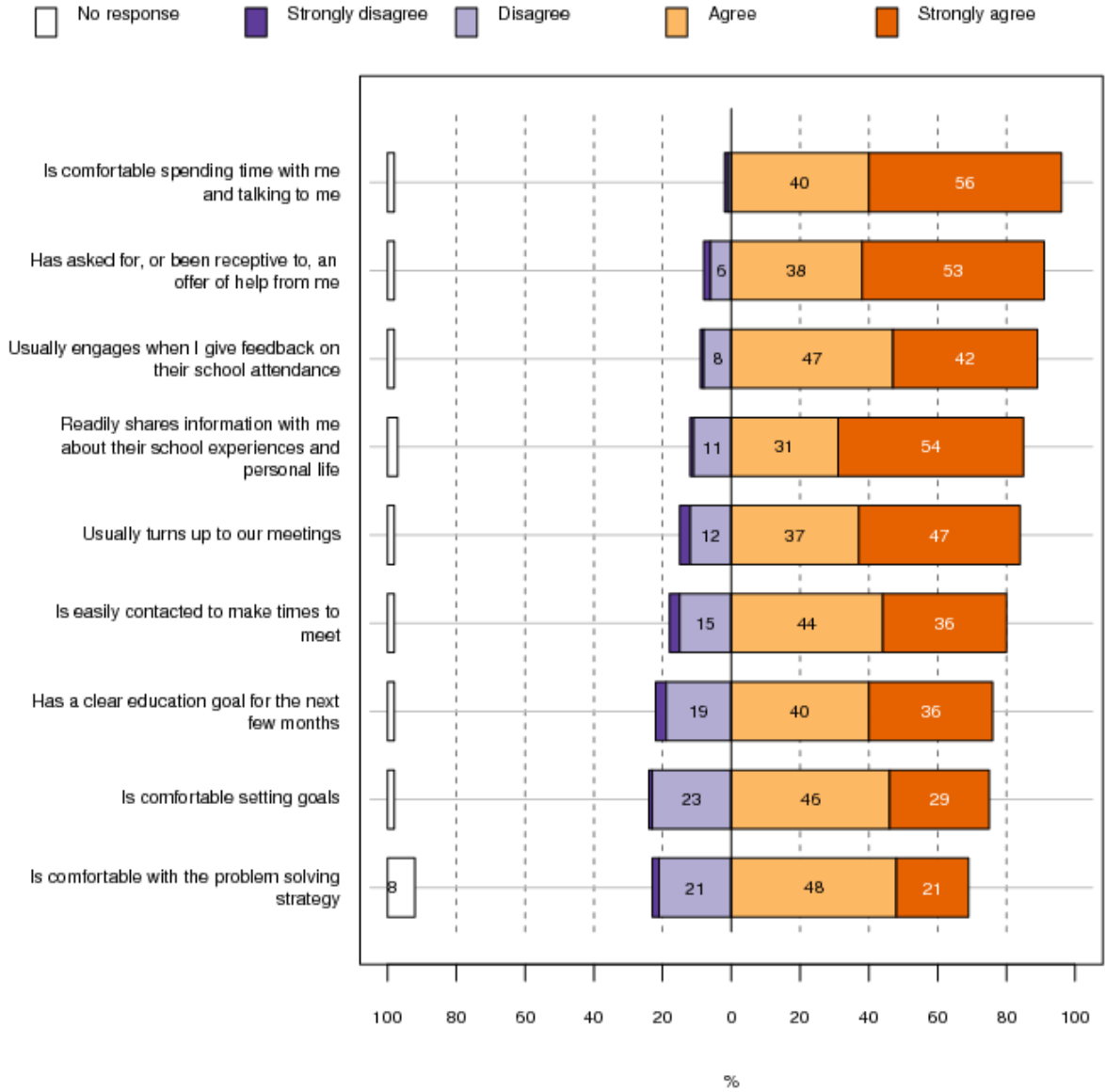
### **Exiting students**

We did not speak to any students who had ‘exited’ Check and Connect, and we did not have access to data on them. Mentors spoke of reducing the frequency or amount of their time with students as the students’ attendance, achievement, and handling of their lives showed the students were confident and capable: the desirability of gradually phasing out rather than a cut off set by a determined date. Some examples were given of a tapering off in work with students where mentors and students were confident the student was ready. The Ministry of Education supervisor at one site noted that other exits could be abrupt, as students shifted home or school. Some mentors worked with students who had gone to activity centres used by their original school, but they could not follow students who went to schools that were not part of the Check and Connect trials.

### Mentors’ views of students’ engagement with them

Mentors generally saw the students they worked with as engaged in the relationship and work with them, as shown in Figure 11. Around a fifth were not easily contacted to make times to meet, or were not comfortable setting goals or with the problem-solving strategy.

**Figure 11 Mentor views of student engagement in the Check and Connect work (n=131)**



We asked the mentors in an open-ended question to identify the elements of Check and Connect that they thought were of most use to the particular student they were telling us about. Table 15 shows that the relationship with the mentor came most to mind. The range of other aspects of Check and Connect that featured here indicate the strength of a model that can be customised. This table does not tell us that only these elements worked for particular students; they occur as part of the richer tapestry of work with the student which forms the Check and Connect programme.

**Table 15 Mentor view of Check and Connect elements that worked best for particular students**

Element	Number of students (n=131)	Percentage of students
Relationship with the mentor	53	40
Data monitoring and feedback	32	24
Goal setting and plans	32	24
Regular meetings	27	21
Persistence plus	21	16
Engagement with school	21	16
Engagement with family	19	14
Capacity building	18	14
Problem solving	17	13
Career/future planning	16	12
Alterable variables	8	6
Study support	5	4
Intrinsic motivation	4	3

The interwoven nature of Check and Connect is evident in the low proportions of students for whom mentors identified an element of Check and Connect that they thought had not worked well.

Mentors identified these elements: student dislike of surveys or paperwork (13 percent), struggling with or disliking goals (12 percent), needs beyond the education focus of Check and Connect (8 percent), the family not being supportive (5 percent), keeping sessions within the school (5 percent), and not being able to offer group sessions (3 percent).

### **Are there any differences in the mentor-student relationship and work associated with mentor views of their support and training?**

To see if there were any links between the support for mentors, related to their capability for their Check and Connect role, and what the students experienced in their relationship and work with the mentors, we linked mentor responses from the survey about their role with the survey responses from the individual students they were mentoring.

Mentors who strongly agreed with items related to their support and training also strongly agreed that the students they worked with were comfortable setting goals, had a clear education goal for the next few months, and were comfortable problem-solving. Strong agreement with being able to problem solve with their team when they needed other ideas or contacts was linked to a number of the items we asked about student work with mentors.

Student views that the work with their mentor (such as weekly meetings, goal setting) was very useful was more likely if they had mentors who strongly agreed that their training and support were useful.

### **Are there any differences in the mentor-student relationship and work associated with student ethnicity?**

Based on the student survey responses, Māori and Pasifika students had similar views of their relationship with their mentor. Somewhat more Māori students than Pasifika rated the weekly meetings, checking in about school attendance, and feedback from their mentor about their attendance as very useful, and strongly agreed that their goals in Check and Connect had helped them make some useful changes, that they had a clear goal for what they wanted to achieve in school or in their learning, and that their current goal was achievable.

Mentors were somewhat more likely to strongly agree that Pasifika students readily shared information with them about their school experiences and personal life than did Māori students. In an open-ended question asking about the elements of Check and Connect that had been of most use to the student, they were more likely to identify ‘persistence plus’, problem-solving and capacity building for Māori students,<sup>23</sup> and career/future building for Pasifika students. In thinking of elements of Check and Connect that did not work well for a student, more identified student needs that went beyond the education focus of the programme for Pasifika students<sup>24</sup>.

Mentors of more Pasifika students than Māori had sought and gained additional curriculum support for them, and worked with their teachers. Mentors of more Māori students than Pasifika students had worked with the school’s social worker on their behalf.

### **Are there any differences in the mentor-student relationship and work associated with matching of student and mentor cultural identity?**

Within the parameters of their funding, and the desirability of mentors working with just a few schools so that solid relationships could be built, the trial sites generally aimed to match student and mentor ethnicity as well as gender. For students of Pasifika origin, this was not always a one to one match with their own culture.

Where we can match student and mentor ethnicity, we found that around a third of the Māori students have Māori mentors, a third have Pasifika mentors and a third have Pākehā mentors. Almost half of the Pasifika students have Pasifika mentors, 14 percent have Māori mentors and over a third have Pākehā mentors. About two thirds of the students of other ethnicities have Pākehā mentors.

With the caution that we have low numbers of those who were ethnically matched for some of our data, we looked at the links with student views of their relationship with, and work with, their mentor. We found no links, including with the item “I feel my mentor respects my cultural identity.” Nor did we find any links with the mentor and student factors.

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<sup>23</sup> The difference was statistically significant for problem-solving and capacity building.

<sup>24</sup> The difference was statistically significant.

**Are there any differences in the mentor-student relationship and work associated with student gender?**

Student answers showed no differences between male and female students in their views of their work with mentors. Somewhat more mentors of female students strongly agreed that they were comfortable setting goals, or with the problem-solving strategy, readily shared information about their school experiences and personal life, had asked for or been receptive to an offer of help from the mentor, and had a clear education goal for the next few months. However, mentors also disagreed with these items just as much for females and males, so there was a range of take-up of the Check and Connect support and strategies within each gender.

Mentors of female students were more likely than those of male students to identify the relationship they had with the student, data monitoring, persistence plus, capacity building and engagement with the family as elements of most use to the students. Mentors of male students were more likely than those of female students to identify goal setting and plans. Elements that seemed not to work so well (for some) female students were that their needs went beyond the education focus of Check and Connect, they disliked surveys or paperwork, and struggled with setting goals.<sup>25</sup>

Mentors sought additional support for female students more than for male, both through schools, including additional curriculum support, and through their site. More female students had been helped by their mentors with direct tutoring or their homework.<sup>26</sup>

**Are there any differences in the mentor-student relationship and work associated with the number of changes made by students?**

We found that many of the items we asked students and mentors about the way they worked together were associated with the number of changes made by students.

When we look at student views of their relationship with their mentor, shown in Table 16, we find a lower proportion of those who made (just) a few changes reporting strong agreement with the items asked.

Table 16 **Improved school effort and results factor: number of changes in relation to student relationship with their Check and Connect mentor**

Student view	% students reporting strong agreement		
	A few changes (n=22)	Some changes (n=27)	Many changes (n=35)
I feel comfortable meeting with my mentor	68	81	83
My mentor has really helped me	50	81	83
I know my mentor is really on my side	45	70	80
I feel comfortable talking with my mentor	50	81	77
I feel my mentor respects my cultural identity	68	78	77
I know my mentor is there for me no matter what I do	50	63	71

<sup>25</sup> These differences were statistically significant.

<sup>26</sup> These differences were statistically significant.

When we look at ‘checking in’ about attendance, we find views of the usefulness of weekly meetings and checking in increase in relation to the number of changes students made in relation to their school effort and results – but Table 17 shows there is no difference in how they felt about their mentor’s feedback about that attendance.

**Table 17** *Improved school effort and results* factor: number of changes in relation to student work with their Check and Connect mentor

Kind of work	% students reporting very useful		
	<i>A few changes</i> (n=22)	<i>Some changes</i> (n=27)	<i>Many changes</i> (n=35)
Weekly meetings	32	37	63
Checking in about attendance record	41	33	46
Feedback from my mentor about my attendance	55	44	54

The pattern seen here for students who made the most changes to also report finding the weekly meetings very useful also held for the *Improved feelings* factor, but there were no associations between that factor and with student views of the usefulness of checking in and feedback about their attendance.

All three items though were associated with how many gains were made in relation to *Improved support*, as shown in Table 18.

**Table 18** *Improved support* student factor: number of changes in relation to student work with their Check and Connect mentor

Kind of work	% students reporting very useful	
	<i>Some changes</i> (n=39)	<i>Many changes</i> (n=35)
Weekly meetings	33	71
Checking in about attendance record	36	49
Feedback from my mentor about my attendance	46	60

We also found links between the items we asked students about goals, and the student factor *Improved school effort and results*, and to a lesser extent, with the mentor factor, *Improved feelings and support*. Table 19 shows the pattern for the *Improved school effort and results* factor.

**Table 19** *Improved school effort and results* factor: number of changes in relation to student view of goals

Goals	% students reporting strong agreement		
	<i>A few changes</i> (n=22)	<i>Some changes</i> (n=27)	<i>Many changes</i> (n=35)
I feel comfortable setting goals	18	52	63
I have a clear goal for the next few months	15	37	49
I think my current goal is achievable	14	48	46
I have a clear goal for what I want to achieve in school or in my learning	23	56	54
The goals I've had in Check and Connect have helped me to make some useful changes	32	37	63

The mentor view of the student’s work with them was associated with both mentor factors – and the student factors: with more engagement with the work associated with making many changes. We give the picture with first the student factor, *Improved school effort and results*, in Table 20, followed by the mentor factor, in Table 21.

**Table 20 Mentor views of the student’s work on Check and Connect in relation to the student factor *Improved school effort and results***

Mentor view of the student	% mentors reporting strong agreement		
	<i>A few changes</i> (n=22)	<i>Some changes</i> (n=27)	<i>Many changes</i> (n=35)
Comfortable spending time with me and talking to me	41	63	57
Readily shares information with me about their school experiences and personal life	45	59	57
Usually turns up to our meetings	32	37	54
Has asked for or been receptive to an offer of help from me	36	52	54
Clear education goal for next few months	18	30	54
Easily contacted to make times to meet	18	30	49
Usually engages when I give feedback on their school attendance	41	33	46
Comfortable setting goals	9	37	34
Comfortable with the problem-solving strategy	5	26	31

**Table 21 Mentor views of the student’s work on Check and Connect in relation to the mentor factor *Improved school effort and results***

Mentor view of the student	% mentors reporting strong agreement		
	<i>A few changes</i> (n=26)	<i>Some changes</i> (n=25)	<i>Many changes</i> (n=25)
Comfortable spending time with me and talking to me	42	68	76
Readily shares information with me about their school experiences and personal life	38	68	80
Usually turns up to our meetings	31	52	64
Has asked for or been receptive to an offer of help from me	27	68	72
Clear education goal for next few months	12	40	80
Easily contacted to make times to meet	15	44	60
Usually engages when I give feedback on their school attendance	27	44	68
Comfortable setting goals	15	28	60
Comfortable with the problem-solving strategy	8	8	64

Students with whom the mentors had built trusting relationships and supported to set realistic goals and problem-solve were the ones most likely to make many changes when it came to managing their feelings better, and (linked to that), attracting more support from others, as shown in Table 22.

**Table 22 Mentor views of the student's work on Check and Connect in relation to the mentor factor *Improved support and managing feelings***

Mentor view of the student	% mentors reporting strong agreement		
	<i>A few changes</i> (n=14)	<i>Some changes</i> (n=33)	<i>Many changes</i> (n=26)
Comfortable spending time with me and talking to me	36	57	81
Readily shares information with me about their school experiences and personal life	21	58	85
Usually turns up to our meetings	36	30	77
Has asked for or been receptive to an offer of help from me	29	42	81
Clear education goal for next few months	29	33	62
Easily contacted to make times to meet	14	27	62
Usually engages when I give feedback on their school attendance	14	39	65
Comfortable setting goals	14	30	50
Comfortable with the problem-solving strategy	7	21	46

## Summary

Students and mentors alike pointed to the quality and nature of their relationship as a critical component of Check and Connect. The quantitative analysis also shows that this is associated with the amount of changes students make. As illustrated in the previous chapter, students valued the attention they were given by someone who cared about their well-being and future, who showed confidence in them, backed by suggestions and support that students found did work. Students felt able to be their full selves with their mentors. This meant the mentors had more information to work with to help the young person than their teachers, parents, or friends, who often saw only part of the young person. Mentors' experience was that until students trusted them, they would not open out, and would not be receptive to the Check and Connect strategies. Relationship building was therefore key.

The mentors brought with them relevant previous experience in working with young people, and an enjoyment of that work. The Check and Connect components that they used gave them valuable tools in making the relationship effective for student change, as shown in the quantitative analysis and student comments, giving a common framework that they could also customise for each student. The work on study skills brought just over a third of them to directly tutor or help students with homework.

Mentors did not work in isolation: they gained considerably from working within the site teams, with their colleagues, advice of their co-ordinator, and Ministry of Education supervisor. They also sought additional expertise where it was needed, for around a third of the students.



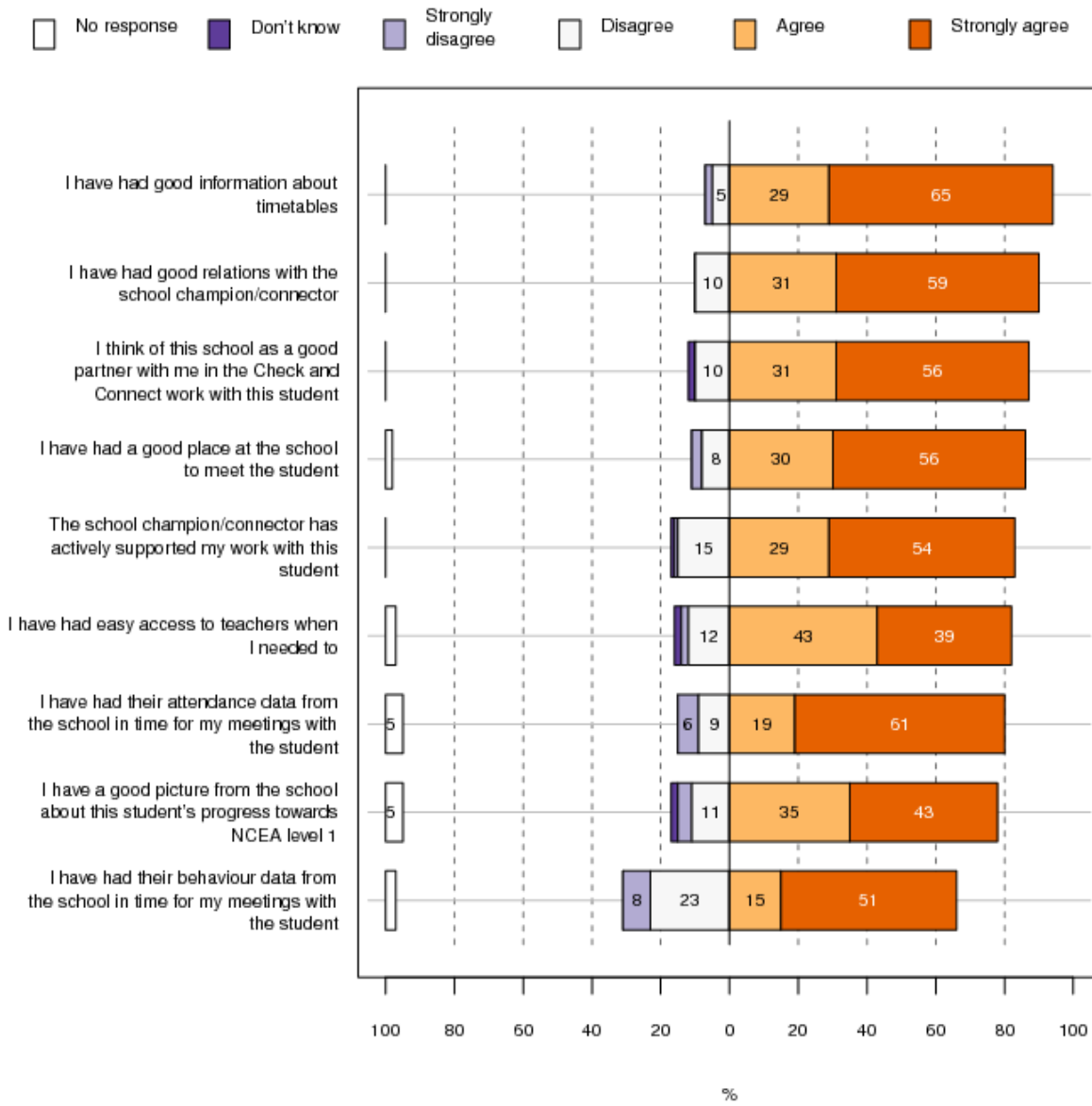
## 5. The school role in student change

Mentors need to work closely with schools. They are dependent on schools for the data on attendance, engagement and achievement that helps them to ‘check and connect’ with students. Their regular meetings with students are on school sites. Because of the importance of having good access to and relationships with schools, and to save on travel time, mentors in two of the trial sites worked with just a few of their trial site schools rather than across all of them.

We first describe mentors’ experiences of working with schools in relation to individual students, then their overall views of their relationships with schools. We draw on the survey of mentors about their role, and about the students they worked with, the group interviews at each site, and other information from the sites. Then we provide school champion, teacher, and principal views of their work with Check and Connect. Finally, we look at whether mentors’ views of how they work with schools was associated with the amount of change for students.

At the end of 2015, most mentors were positive about their relationships with students’ schools; around half strongly agreed that they had attendance data in time for their meetings with students, had good information about timetables, and good relations with the school champion. Around a third did not feel they had behaviour data from the school in time for their weekly meetings (perhaps indicating differences in how schools record this data), and around 15–20 percent thought they did not have attendance data in time, a good place at the school to meet the student, a good picture of the student’s progress towards NCEA level 1, or active support from the school champion. Figure 12 provides the full details.

**Figure 12 Mentor views of school support for their work with students (n=131)<sup>27</sup>**

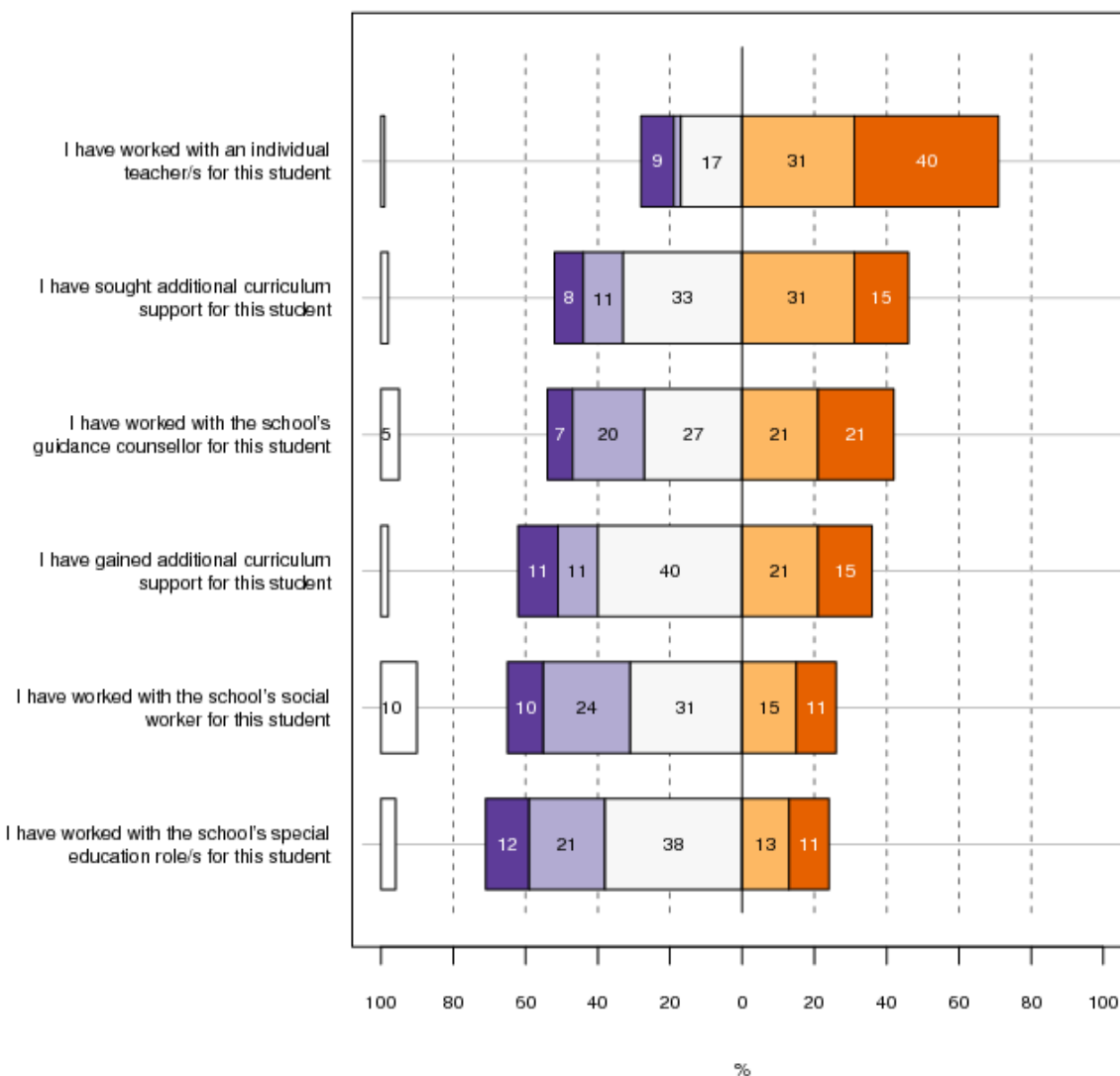


<sup>27</sup> The 131 students came from 17 schools.

Many of the mentors had worked with individual teachers. Almost half had sought additional curriculum support for a student, and most of these had gained some. Two-fifths had worked with school guidance counsellors, 26 percent with school social workers, and 24 percent with schools' special education roles. Figure 13 shows the detail.

**Figure 13 Mentors work with school staff for individual students (n=131)**

No response
  Don't know
  Strongly disagree
  Disagree
  Agree
  Strongly agree



A quarter of the teachers who completed end of 2015 surveys about Check and Connect students had had direct contact with the student's mentor. Two-thirds said this contact had been of some use in relation to the student's engagement in their class.

Some mentors were more pro-active than others, or working with schools that were well organised and welcoming of partnerships with others around student engagement and achievement. There were examples of actively working with school staff to share information about student progress so that the students could be recognised within the school system (examples from mentors and students were of being asked to take on school leadership roles).

While mentors were largely positive about their work with schools, 76 percent would like to change some aspect of the relationship they had with schools. Mainly they wanted schools to understand more about Check and Connect, and to see the Check and Connect work as a partnership rather than an add-on, or something to hand students over to.

Schools need to open their communication more about their disciplinary processes and the progress of a student. Sometimes we are left out until we need to support on a more reactionary level, with stand downs and defiance.

A constant theme was the need for timely access to data on student attendance, behaviour, and NCEA progress.

Sometimes you're quite low on the priority list, frustrating because you're committed to working with the schools. It would be great to have the same access to data that we have at \_\_\_ school. Some make you feel like you're asking for blood.

Mentors wanted electronic access to KAMAR data where they did not have it (such access eases the demands mentors feel themselves to be making on school staff as well as giving them information in time to be used with students and seemed better at the end of 2015 than a year before). Several working with students in alternative education noted that activity centres were still recording attendance on paper; and that because they had different period lengths, the data was not comparable to schools. (This was also a question raised in another site where different schools structured their day differently, so that what would be recorded as a missing session could mean an hour, or half a day.)

They also wanted schools to support students more academically and to allow Check and Connect students to access career events and connections, and support some group coaching work with students.

Examples were given in the surveys and group interviews of frustrations when schools did not have good systems to arrange a room to meet students, or simply lacked spare space: mentors had found themselves in unsuitable spaces for the privacy needed for their work with students, including the thoroughfare to the staff kitchen and a toilet, and had sometimes ended up talking with students in their car or on or near the school grounds.

Including Wairoa in the Hawke's Bay site had proved problematic, and the mentors thought that they were less effective for the students there: because of the travel time needed (an hour and a half each way) they lacked the flexibility to reschedule that was often useful if a student was absent, or chose to absent themselves for the appointment time. It made it hard to exercise 'persistence plus.' As well, they did not have the community networks and contacts they could use for their students in Napier and Hastings.

### **School champions' perspectives**

We had 10 replies to our school champion survey. These school champions were either senior leaders in the school (5), or led pastoral support in the school. Their school champion role had lasted from two months to 26 months at the end of 2015, with a median of 21 months, indicating some stability in the role (at least among those who responded to our survey). The median number of students on Check and Connect at their school was 6.5, ranging from two to 20. The median number of mentors they worked with was three, ranging from two to five.

We asked school champions how they nominated students. Most indicated several sources of nomination, and both regular reviews by the school's pastoral team (9) and a case by case basis (8). At six schools the criteria given the school by the Check and Connect team was shared with Year 9 and 10 teachers, with five schools asking these teachers for nominations at any time, and one asking them to nominate at the start of each term.

All but one of the school champions had had issues with the nomination process or its outcome: two often, four sometimes, and three in the early stages of their work with Check and Connect. The main issue was the time it took to get all the information needed together to nominate a student (8). It was also not clear to school champions who would be accepted (3), the criteria did not cover all the students they thought could benefit (2), and it took too long between nomination and the student starting Check and Connect (2), or between nomination and acceptance (1).

Table 23 shows the main things that school champions did in this role. All were involved in nominations and organising things so that mentors can work in the school, and most attended a trial site-wide meeting with other school champions. Many accessed more support for individual students from within the school. Fewer than half got regular progress reports from mentors or shared those with teachers.

**Table 23 School champion activities**

Activity	Number of school champions (n=10)
Organise nominations within the school	10
Meet with Check and Connect co-ordinator to discuss nominations	10
Periodic review meeting with Check and Connect co-ordinator and other school champions	9
Arrange mentor access to hard copies of attendance and behaviour databases	8
Liaise with Check and Connect co-ordinator	8
Arrange mentor electronic access to attendance and behaviour databases	7
Get more support for some of the Check and Connect students	7
Discuss information from attendance or behaviour reports with mentors	7
Share timetable information with mentors	6
Co-ordinate or facilitate mentors working with school's pastoral team	6
Co-ordinate mentors' visits to school to see students	5
Problem-solving together around likely suspension or leaving school	5
Get progress reports from mentors	4
Regular review of students' progress and what is being done to support it with mentor/s	4
Co-ordinate mentors' contact with teachers	3
Share progress reports on students with their teachers	3
Discuss how NCEA works with mentors	2

Six of the ten champions had a regular time to touch base with each Check and Connect mentor working with their school. Eight touched base when the mentor made contact with a query, and five if they asked mentors about individual student progress. Their contact with mentors was sufficient for seven of the 10 mentors.

On the whole, school champions were very satisfied or satisfied with the information they got from mentors about student progress and with students they could nominate (7); two were (only) sometimes satisfied.<sup>28</sup>

Information from mentors was usually discussed with the school pastoral team (9), and passed onto this team (7). Urgent situations sometimes saw pastoral teams working with the mentor (6). Information from mentors also activated referrals to other support outside the school (6), was passed on to individual teachers (5), and sometimes next steps in terms of what was happening in class discussed by the school champion with teachers (2).

<sup>28</sup> One school champion did not answer these questions.

## Principal views

All six principals were satisfied with who they could nominate onto Check and Connect; five were satisfied with the way the Check and Connect team worked with school staff, and one was unsure. One commented that initial communication issues were improved by introducing mentors to staff, and improving mentor access to school data. School involvement in Check and Connect had not led to changes in how these six schools identified and supported disengaging students.

## How do differences in mentor work with a school relate to student changes?

Table 24 below shows links between the number of changes made by students in their engagement in school and achievement, and the communication between schools and mentors, and work together. Mentors’ overall judgement that a school was a good partner in Check and Connect was clearly linked to the number of changes a student made.

Table 24 ***Improved school engagement and results*** mentor factor and work with the student’s school

Work with the school	% mentors strongly agreeing		
	<i>Few changes</i> (n=59)	<i>Some changes</i> (n=36)	<i>Many changes</i> (n=34)
Student attendance data in time for meetings with mentor	57	58	68
Student behaviour data in time for meetings with mentor	54	44	56
Good information about timetables	59	67	71
Good place to meet student at school	49	64	59
Good relations with school champion	51	58	71
School champion actively supported mentor work with student	51	53	59
Good picture from school on student’s progress towards NCEA level 1	32	44	56
Easy access to teachers when needed	32	39	53
Worked with an individual teacher for this student	37	47	41
Worked with school guidance counsellor for this student	15	19	26
Worked with school social worker for this student	7	14	18
Sought additional curriculum support for this student	9	17	26
Gained additional curriculum support for this student	8	17	26
Worked with school special education role for this student	8	6	24
School is a good partner with me in the Check and Connect work with this student	37	64	79

There were similar patterns found in relation to the *Improved support and managing feelings* mentor factor, as shown in Table 25. Interestingly, those who make many changes are not seen to have better information from the school about their attendance or behaviour, or timetables. This may be because where relationships with students were well established, and students were paying attention themselves to attendance or behaviour, in relation to their goals, students were sharing it within the weekly sessions anyway. But having this information from schools in advance certainly eased mentors’ work, and helped their early work with students.

More of their mentors do report good relations with the school champion, a good place to meet them, a good picture of their NCEA progress, and active work with others in the school.

**Table 25** *Improved support & managing feelings* mentor factor and work with the student’s school

Work with the school	% mentors strongly agreeing		
	<i>Few changes</i> (n=50)	<i>Some changes</i> (n=50)	<i>Many changes</i> (n=29)
Student attendance data in time for meetings with mentor	64	54	66
Student behaviour data in time for meetings with mentor	60	44	52
Good information about timetables	66	60	69
Good place to meet student at school	54	54	66
Good relations with school champion	48	60	72
School champion actively supported mentor work with student	46	50	72
Good picture from school on student’s progress towards NCEA level 1	36	44	48
Easy access to teachers when needed	38	34	52
Worked with an individual teacher for this student	46	32	48
Worked with school guidance counsellor for this student	8	20	38
Worked with school social worker for this student	2	16	21
Sought additional curriculum support for this student	12	8	34
Gained additional curriculum support for this student	14	6	34
Worked with school special education role for this student	10	8	21
School is a good partner with me in the Check and Connect work with this student	40	56	83

## Summary

Overall, the necessary partnership between Check and Connect teams and schools has settled, and was working well for more than half the students.

However, it would seem that there is still more variability than one would like in the relationships between Check and Connect mentors and schools, especially given the links shown in the previous two tables between good working relations and student gains. Sorting out electronic access for mentors to student data is well over-due, and should be a priority for the Ministry of Education. Sharing what a good partnership looks like with schools and the sites, using information from this report and from the sites and schools would also help.





## 6. Parents’ and whānau role in student change

Parent engagement in Check and Connect is an essential component in the trial guidelines. Parental permission is needed before students are accepted on Check and Connect (though mentors found that this had not always been gained by schools or the programme understood by parents before a student began their Check and Connect work).

The mentors thought it was very important (71 percent) or important (24 percent) to get parent engagement in the Check and Connect work for students to make progress.

However, they also spoke of students who had made progress without parental engagement.

Sometimes parental involvement may be limited, yet students seem to do well regardless. Depends on student needs at the time.

Building relationships with parents varied from straightforward to requiring the ‘persistence plus’ of the guidelines, advice in relation to different cultural practices, and sometimes could not be built.

When you make contact with the parents, some of them have been wanting help but not known where to go – they’ve gone “Yahoo!”

You use everything, phone, text, whatever works, ask them what they prefer, try to keep it positive, “they’ve done this awesome thing”.

I learnt from one school champion to take food, and I took a hamper at Christmas – up till then I couldn’t get past the gate – this time I got all the way in, offered a cuppa. The family had been deliberately avoiding me till then.

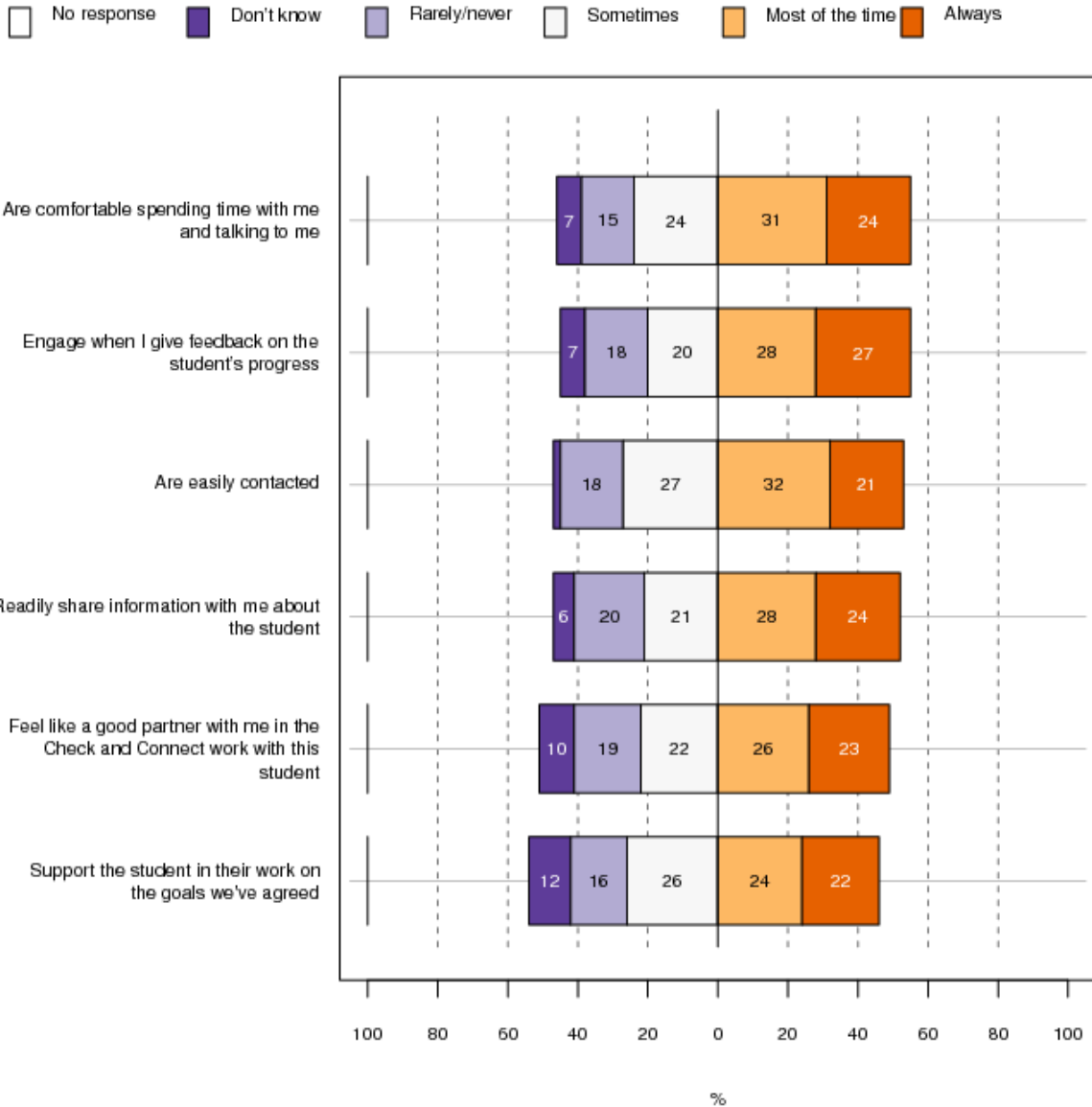
You have to be genuine, positive, and ask “what do you think? Tell me what we need to do together.” They’re used to the growlers from schools, the text messages about their child not attending, not behaving.

Some parents it doesn’t matter if you persist. Some can’t because they work, childcare, family, church commitments, it’s really hard to meet them.

*Some parents don’t want their children at school, they want them at home helping out.*

Mentors’ views of their work with whānau, fono, family or carers shows some variability, as evident in Figure 14. For around 50 to 60 percent of the students, parents were seen as active and supportive partners.

**Figure 14 Mentors’ views of whānau, fono, family or carers and their support for the work with individual students (n= 131)**



Asked if there had been any improvement in whānau, fono, family or carers’ support in relation to students’ educational engagement and achievement since the student started Check and Connect, mentors said that:

- 28 percent of the students had always had supportive whānau, fono, family or carers
- 12 percent of the students had much better support
- 38 percent of the students had a bit better support
- 11 percent of the students had no change in support
- 5 percent of the students had worse support, and for
- 5 percent of the students the mentors did not know about the level of their home support, indicating that students did not (would not) talk about it.

## **Student perspectives**

The student interviews gave examples of how Check and Connect helped some students open out to their parents as they grew more confident, others to enjoy their family more as they learnt to manage their feelings and find a path in life, others to accept family members as they were and look after themselves, or to find new homes if the family environment was too toxic. Parents grew less anxious and more positive in their communication with their adolescents. That in turn helped them at school.

My parents don't get growling calls, they don't have to worry, because I don't get into trouble. I don't get punishments at home.

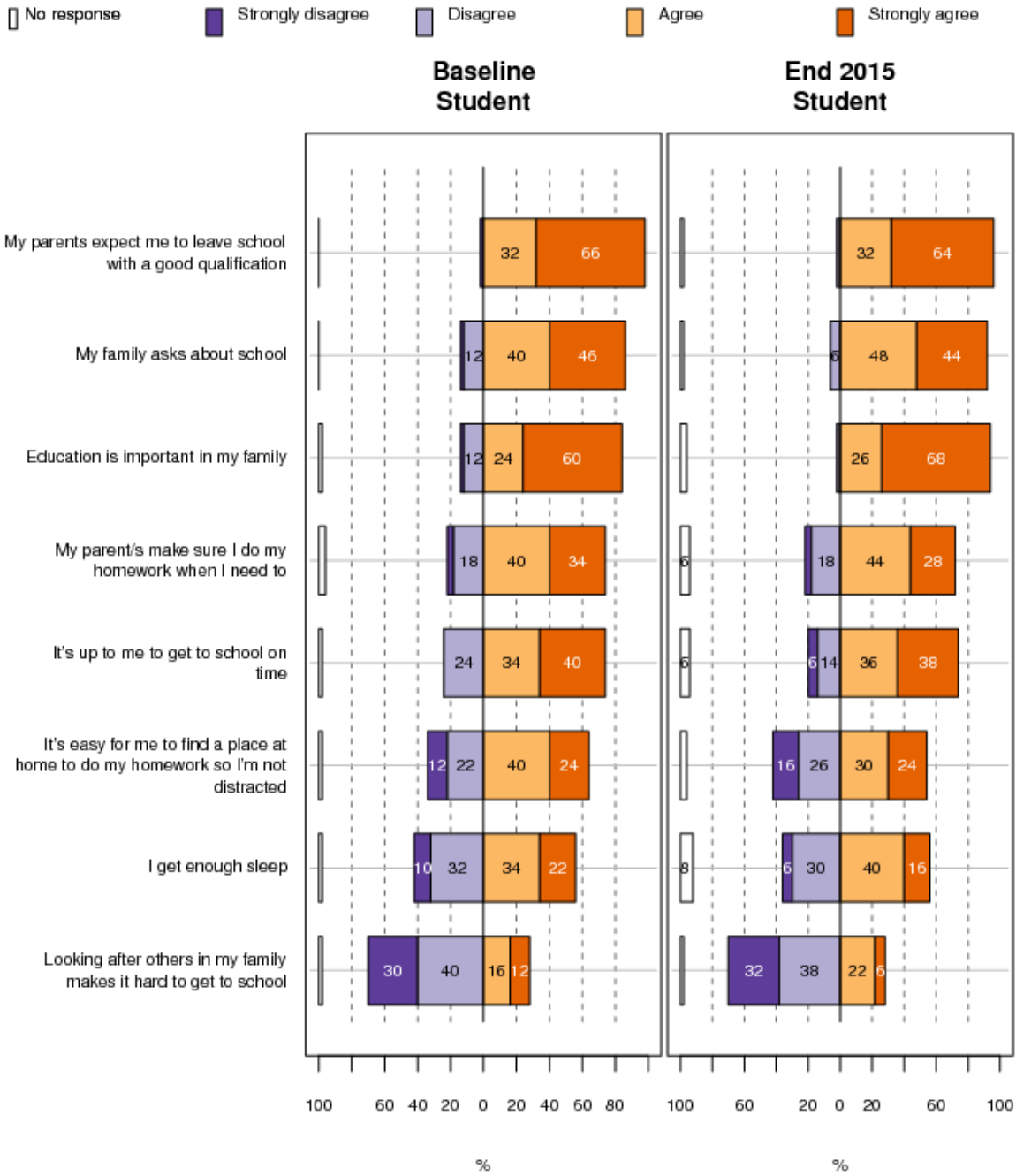
I've stopped locking myself in my room, I'm talking more with my family than I used to. Things are much easier at home.

I'm closer to Dad, I never used to tell him anything. It took a whole year to open up to him, now I talk to Dad about school, about credits, how I like school, want to stay at school, and Dad's proud of me. Before I would go straight to my room, be anti social, that's all gone away.

There are ups and downs at home but Check and Connect definitely helped me with what's going on there. By knowing school is going well, home goes better, being more positive. I can talk it through with my mentor, he's always interested in what's going on at home, he can see sometimes if something is happening at school, he tries to find the trigger point – “that's a random thing for you to go off like that” – so he's helped me identify what starts things, why I can feel anxious, so it's a lot easier now all round.

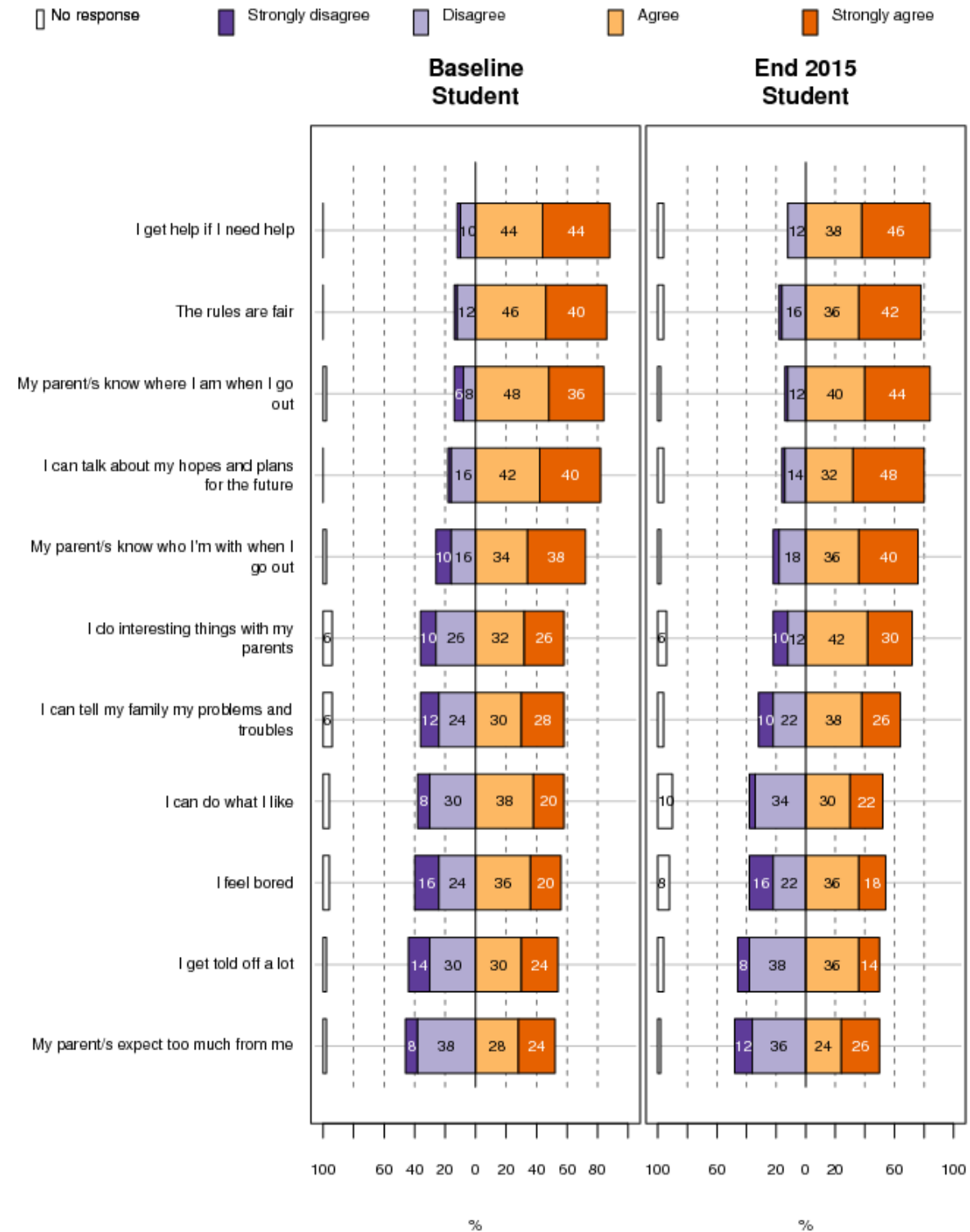
We asked students the same questions about home support for their learning and what home was like for them at the start of their Check and Connect participation and at the end. Figure 15 shows little change over this time in family interest in their child's education – almost all expected their children to leave school with a good qualification, and asked about school, and most made sure their children did their homework. Most students were responsible to get themselves to school on time. Just over half thought they got enough sleep, and could find a place to do their homework where they were not distracted. Twenty-eight percent said looking after others made it hard to get to school.

**Figure 15 Student perspectives on home interest and support for school (n=50)**



Most of the students thought they could get help at home if they needed it, and that they could talk there about their hopes and plans for the future. Two-thirds thought they could tell their family their problems and troubles. More were doing interesting things with their parents at the end of 2015. But half thought their parents expected too much of them, said they got told off a lot, and were bored. These patterns did not change over their participation in Check and Connect. Figure 16 shows the details.

**Figure 16 Student perspectives on home relationships**



Looking at the end of 2015 student surveys enabled us to see if there were different patterns in relation to ethnicity and gender among the students on Check and Connect. Somewhat fewer Pasifika students than Māori students said they could talk about their hopes and plans for the future at home, and that it was easy for them to find a place to do homework without being distracted; and that their parents knew where they were and who they were with when they went out.

Fewer male students could talk to their parents about their future hopes and plans; the males were sharing their goals less with their parents, and getting less support for their achievement. More boys said their parents did not know where they were and who they were with when they went out, and fewer were hanging out with their parents or whānau most days. More girls were looking after family members or doing household work.

### Were mentor views of the relationship with parents related to how much change students made?

We analysed the links between mentors’ views of their work with parents, and the changes students had made, using the two mentor factors. We found that fewer of the students who were in the (just) a few changes category had parents who were always or most of the time easily contacted or engaged with the mentor when they gave feedback on student progress.

Students who had made many changes in relation to improved school engagement and results were the ones whose mentors had the best working relations with their parents, as shown in Table 26. But we also found that these working relations were rare or never happened for 15 percent of the students who were in the ‘many changes’ category on the *improved school engagement and results* factor, and that for 24 percent of these students the mentors rarely or never thought of the parent(s) as a good partner with them in the Check and Connect with this student. There was a similar pattern with the *Improved support and managing feelings* factor.

Table 26 ***Improved school engagement and results*** mentor factor and work with the student’s parents

Work with parents	% mentors saying ‘always/mostly’		
	<i>Few changes</i> (n=59)	<i>Some changes</i> (n=36)	<i>Many changes</i> (n=34)
Parents are easily contacted	44	61	56
Engage when I give feedback on student progress	47	58	65
Comfortable spending time with me and talking with me	49	47	68
Readily share information with me about the student	49	47	62
Support the student in their work on the goals we’ve agreed	37	44	62
Feels like a good partner with me in the Check and Connect work with this student	41	44	65

## Summary

The student and their school engagement and progress are at the centre of Check and Connect. But what happens at home influences what happens at school – and vice versa. Establishing good relations and communication with the student’s parents and whānau or fono was easiest where home was not the primary source of the student’s energy, confidence, and feelings at school. Sometimes it needed progress at school to change the dynamics at home: for adults and the child alike to feel positive about school and the effort needed, and able to talk about it in constructive rather than blaming ways. Sometimes parents simply needed more information about what was going on, for example about the way NCEA works, so that they could support the work their child was doing at school and with their mentor. Sometimes the best the mentor could do was to work with the student so that they had the capacity to keep themselves focused within a home environment which was not going to change to become more positive and supportive of them, and their kindled desire to achieve at school to gain a meaningful career.

Overall, mentors had established good communication and relations and support with students’ goals with around 50 to 60 percent of the students’ families. While the links with gains for students shows that these are important, it is also evident that they are not essential for students to make many changes. Much depends on what changes are needed, and where the family is positioned, as well as what support is also available from school and friends.





## 7. The role of tripartite partnerships in student change

We were asked to look at the quality of partnerships between mentor, family, and school that enabled change. As the previous chapters have shown, a tripartite partnership was not essential for students to make change, though it was effective when everyone was on the same page in relation to knowing a student’s goals and how they could support them.

It’s most effective when you have teacher and parent involvement, because it supports the goals. Teachers will give extra support, parents checking up.

Attendance data can be a bit of a misnomer. I have some students whose attendance is 80–90 percent, but their work output is the bare minimum because they don’t want to be at school. So checking in with them, school, home, all those three elements really helps them navigate their way, builds their confidence, especially with asking teachers for help.

My room’s always clean now – you can walk around without standing on my shoes and bag – I’m a lot tidier. My parents love [mentor]. He came around one time, Mum and [he] had lunch, they figured out ways to help me at home, strategies, Mum got really involved, like another job, to make sure everything’s all right. She’s in touch with [him] every week. He would tell my mum if I was late, wagging, but I haven’t done that in ages.

We know more about mentors’ work with parents and teachers separately than we know about teachers’ work with parents of Check and Connect students. It is therefore hard to provide good descriptions of what tripartite partnerships look like in relation to Check and Connect. We suspect they are not formal partnerships when they exist, but are more open lines of positive communication between each other, and with the student, recognising progress and backing the student to keep working on their goals.



## 8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This evaluation of the New Zealand trial of the Check and Connect programme in three sites shows that most participating students and their mentors noted positive gains for the students.

Student and mentor reports provide the strongest evidence available for this evaluation. Check and Connect is a customised programme, and consistent information on student needs and school attendance and performance levels before they embarked on Check and Connect to compare with where they were at the end of 2015 was not available. Where we could compare ‘start’ data from student and teacher surveys with data at the end of 2015, the numbers are small, and we are therefore cautious about patterns deriving from those comparisons, particularly the data from teachers, which covers only 16 students.

We certainly see clear trends where we look at some factors that should influence student gains from the programme, such as the length of time on Check and Connect. Because of the small numbers involved, these trends were not statistically significant. In the few comparisons where we could establish statistical significance, in relation to ethnicity and gender, the size of the difference tended to be very large (eg, 20 percent compared with 0 percent), and may be an artefact of the size of the particular group. We would not pay the statistically significant comparisons more attention than the clear trends we found.

Factors that were linked to student gains on Check and Connect were:

- length of participation on the programme
- their relationship with their mentor
- their mentor’s use of Check and Connect strategies
- having a mentor who gave high ratings to their training, and support within their team, and
- having a mentor with a good partnership with the school.

We look now at what we found for each of our five evaluation questions.

### **Student change through their participation in Check and Connect**

Evidence from students and mentors shows that the Check and Connect trial has resulted in many positive changes on the outcomes sought, for just over a third of the students, and some or a few changes for almost all the rest of the participants. It was also evident from the interviews and comments on the student survey that some students who would come into our (just) ‘a few changes’ category had made some fundamental shifts, such as increasing their effort and having better academic results, or gaining better ways to deal with things that upset them, getting more support at school, and putting more effort into their schoolwork.

Just under three-quarters of the students responding to the end of 2015 survey said they put more effort into their schoolwork and had better results. Level 1 NCEA achievement was higher than might have been expected, given that most of those for whom we had the information were performing below the general curriculum level for their year when they were nominated. Around two-thirds reported a better sense of their own strengths, and better ways of dealing with things that used to upset them. Student accounts and comments provide some vivid testimony to the “life-changing”

difference it could make to their engagement and achievement in school, and their capacity to live more purposefully, confidently, and contentedly in and out of school.

### Length on Check and Connect

Gains for students were higher for those students who had had between 18 months to two years on the programme, supporting the original programme design. Changing adolescent habits, feelings, behaviours, especially around low school engagement and performance, is not quick work. The Check and Connect students often presented quite complex needs and circumstances.

Because the students who had had 18 months to two years Check and Connect participation were in the minority, it is likely that the pattern of changes we found for the students in the trial sites is an underestimate of the gains for students participating for the recommended length of time on the programme.

### Gender

Female students were more likely than male students to make many changes through their Check and Connect participation. It may be that this is linked to the pull of peers that was evident in student reports of their friendships, with males more likely to have friends who wagged school and wanted them to do stupid things, or who didn't talk about future hopes and plans, and less likely to talk with their friends about what they were learning in school.

### Ethnicity

Māori students were more likely to be seen by their mentors to make many changes than Pasifika students, but this pattern was not evident in the student reports.

### Reason why students were nominated for Check and Connect

The information we have on why individual students were nominated for Check and Connect is limited, and we could find no clear patterns in terms of whether the main reason was truancy, lateness, (non)completion of schoolwork, behaviour, or whether they had experienced a recent major trauma in their life.

### The mentor's role in student change

The gains for students that we found have been achieved through the quality of the mentors' work with students. Students who made many changes rated more highly than others their relationship with their mentor and the Check and Connect strategies. These strategies included weekly meetings, setting goals, having feedback from their mentor about their attendance and checking in on attendance.

Mentors found that building the foundations for students to trust them was critical, and that sometimes meant focusing on students' out-of-school relationships and challenges rather than school attendance at the start of their work with them, or during it. Where students trusted their mentors, they felt able to be their full selves with them, often giving the mentor more information to work with than students' teachers or parents might have.

Students generally felt their cultural identity was supported in their work with their mentor.

Additional support was gained by mentors for 34 percent of the students, mostly from their schools, and also through their Check and Connect team and its contacts. As well, mentors had helped 36 percent of the students with direct tutoring or homework.

## Mentor support and training

Mentors found the general Check and Connect approach worked with almost all their students. In terms of their training, they were most positive about the use of cognitive behaviour theory, check-in and feedback about school attendance, and motivational interviewing. They were least convinced about the value of the Pathways map. The initial training had come too soon for almost half of the mentors, since they were not then working with students, and just under a third thought it had not been clear about the approach. A third did not think the guidelines they had for the programme were clear. They wanted more ongoing training and support.

Generally the mentors' work has been well supported by having mentors work in teams together, within NGOs that can link to other supports for young people such as mental health, health, and government agencies.

Students were more positive about their work with their mentors when they had mentors who rated their training and support within their team most highly, indicating the value of good training and teams.

It was essential to the students that the mentor was someone they could trust, someone with whom they could speak freely, and someone who behaved and responded differently from the teachers and school counsellors who had 'growled' at them or did not have enough time to put the student at the centre of their attention on a regular basis. Since this evaluation does not include Check and Connect provided by schools, we cannot definitively tell from this evaluation whether it is essential that Check and Connect mentors are not school staff. We think the fact that they were not played a useful part in their ability to win the confidence of students who were not comfortable in their schools, and for the mentors to be able to put individual students first.

## Student ethnicity

On the whole Māori and Pasifika students had similar views of their relationship with their mentor. There were some differences as to how useful some of the Check and Connect strategies were, with more positive views from Māori students about checking in and feedback from their mentor about their attendance, and goal setting.

## Matching of student and mentor cultural identity

Trial sites endeavoured to match student and mentor cultural identity, and could do so for around a third of the Māori students, and half of the Pasifika students (within the broad category of Pasifika). Whether student and mentor were matched this way did not show any links with student gains from their Check and Connect work, or with whether they felt their mentor respected their cultural identity.

## Student gender

While female students were more likely to make many changes as a result of their Check and Connect participation, student views of their relationship with their mentor and the work they did with them did not differ for males and females. Mentors of more female than male students identified the relationship they had with the family, data monitoring, persistence plus, capacity building and engagement with the family as elements of most use to the students. Mentors of more male than female students identified goal setting and plans as of most use. Female students had more additional support that their mentor had gained for them, through their school or NGO site, and more had been helped with direct tutoring or homework.

All but three percent of the students had the same gender as their mentor, so we were not able to analyse whether gender-matching was linked to any differences in student experiences and gains.

## Prior mentor experience in working with young people

All the mentors brought experience in working with young people to their Check and Connect role, including recreational, community and school-based programmes, with some having worked as social workers, in health, mental

health and drug and alcohol addiction programmes, and other kinds of support and coaching. Because all mentors had some previous experience, and often several different kinds of experience, and because there were only 17 mentors in total, it was not possible to analyse whether mentors needed prior experience working with young people to be effective in their Check and Connect role, or whether one kind of experience might be more useful for this role than others.

### **The school role in student change**

Students whose mentors were most positive about their work with the school were more likely to have made many changes than others.

Mentors worked closely with their students' schools. Most were positive about their relationships with these schools, though issues around accessing behaviour, attendance and NCEA data were experienced, and sometimes difficulty in finding a private space to meet with students. Overall, after some teething problems, the partnership with schools was working well for more than half the students, though there was still more variability than desirable.

It was difficult for the Hawke's Bay site to work as well with Wairoa College as they could with their local schools.

School champions and principals were positive about Check and Connect. School champions had some issues with the time it took to get together the information from teachers and others to nominate a student. Most were satisfied with the contact with and information from the mentors working with their school's students.

Students whose mentors were most positive about their work with the school were more likely to have made many changes than others.

### **The family role in student change**

Parent engagement is an essential component of the Check and Connect framework. Overall, mentors had established good communication and relations and support with students' goals with around 50 to 60 percent of the students' families. While the links with gains for students shows that these are important, it is also evident that they are not essential for students to make many changes. Much depends on what changes are needed, and where the family is positioned, as well as what support is also available from school and friends.

### **Partnerships that enable change**

A tripartite partnership between mentor, school and family was not essential for a student to make meaningful gains through their Check and Connect participation, although where they existed, and all could communicate well and support a student's goals, they were effective.

### **Recommendations**

Like any trial of a new programme, the Check and Connect trial has not been without its teething problems. While some of these have been overcome, there are still a number of issues that need Ministry of Education national level attention and coherence across districts to strengthen the programme.

Our recommendations are that the Ministry of Education:

- Ø leads a national approach to ongoing learning from the Check and Connect sites, through providing regular opportunities to share effective mentor-school partnerships (with the input of schools), what has worked to gain the trust of hard to reach students, and work with them to effect change, effective mentor-parent partnerships, and what has worked with students with different issues at nomination

- ∅ provides ongoing training on topics identified by mentors, and on key strategies; initially this could include finding out more about the use of the Pathways map and any issues around it
- ∅ simplifies site reporting, and uses the site reports for ongoing national learning to support the efficacy of Check and Connect and inform other work on student engagement
- ∅ ensures that schools provide mentors with the electronic access to student data from the school that they need – including NCEA credits as well as attendance and behaviour
- ∅ reviews the inclusion of Wairoa College in the Hawke's Bay site, since it did seem more difficult for mentors to meet student needs where a school is physically distant from their base
- ∅ provides a valid, and simple online monitoring of student progress that is consistent across the sites and that can also be pulled together efficiently to provide periodic national pictures of the effectiveness of Check and Connect, and fed into ongoing learning shared with the sites to keep improving practice –
  - this is likely to include some work on how schools record attendance and behaviour data to identify differences, and decide what data or categorisation of data is essential, so that analysis is realistic
- ∅ provides more coherence and more efficiency for the sites and for itself by having the national responsibility both for the Check and Connect programme and for contracting the NGOs who provide it
- ∅ makes Check and Connect available to Year 7 and 8 students to stay with them into Year 9, to provide a bridge for students showing disengagement before they get to secondary school, and support them to make academic progress so that they are better placed for the demands of the secondary curriculum
- ∅ continues to provide Check and Connect through the existing NGO sites, making the most of the expertise now present at those sites
- ∅ uses the site expertise and the results of this evaluation to decide on provision in other sites that could benefit from Check and Connect
- ∅ investigates its interest in seeing if Check and Connect could be provided as well within school sites by:
  - finding out more about the Otaki College use of Check and Connect to see what gains have been made for students, how the team has worked, with a particular focus on the student-mentor relationship and use of strategies, and the particular context of this school's approach to behaviour and student support
  - finding out more about the use of Check and Connect in two West Auckland secondary schools, using RTLBs
  - discussing with the schools who have worked with Check and Connect mentors in the existing trial sites their views on the viability and sustainability of providing Check and Connect mentoring in-house, and the support that would be needed if they thought this would be desirable
  - discussing with the two Check and Connect programme people visiting Wellington on 12 August what lies behind effective school provision of Check and Connect in the USA, and analysing their identification of enabling factors in terms of the New Zealand school context
  - discussing with primary schools and intermediates the support they think they would need to provide Check and Connect in-house if it is extended to Years 7 and 8.