



## **Building a Strong School Culture: Insights on Student Retention, Educational Neuroscience, and Engaging the Teenage Brain**

In an ever-changing educational landscape, retaining students for post-16 study is becoming increasingly competitive. Gone are the days when students saw their secondary education as a seamless seven-year journey within the same institution. Many are now actively exploring alternative provisions, making it vital for schools to adapt and ensure their offering remains attractive.

This post draws on insights shared during our recent Sixth Form Conference, particularly from Jeremy, Retired Assistant Head Teacher responsible for Post 16 education turned educational neuroscientist. His thought-provoking presentation explored how schools can enhance student retention by leveraging an understanding of the teenage brain, fostering school pride, and providing engaging experiences for students and their families.

### **The Power of Early Engagement**

From his experience, Jeremy emphasises the importance of connecting with students as early as Year 8 or 9. Building a strong relationship with students during these years creates a solid foundation for future engagement and retention. Many schools start serious conversations with students only in Year 11, but Jeremy suggests identifying and nurturing potential early on. For students showing promise, sustained encouragement and conversations about their future can

be transformative. Early connection sets the stage for students to view the school as a meaningful place for academic growth and personal development.

## **Understanding the Teenage Brain**

Jeremy highlights key aspects of teenage brain development that can inform educational approaches. Neuroscience reveals that the teenage brain matures from the back to the front, meaning rational thinking and risk assessment abilities are still developing well into adolescence. Consequently, students in Years 8 and 9 may exhibit impulsive behaviours, but this is simply a part of their developmental process. Schools that understand this can approach disciplinary actions and behaviour management with greater empathy and effectiveness.

The teenage brain is highly influenced by social connections and peer approval. Jeremy advises focusing energy on influential individuals within peer groups. Engaging these leaders can, in turn, influence others, creating a ripple effect throughout the student body. This approach leverages the social nature of the teenage brain to foster a positive, engaged community.

## **Celebrating School Culture: Priming and Anchoring**

A key tactic in student retention is cultivating pride in the school environment, a concept rooted in psychological principles like priming and anchoring. Priming involves consistently highlighting the strengths and benefits of the school, reinforcing a sense of pride and belonging. By repeatedly sharing positive messages about the school's Sixth Form or post-16 centre, educators can create an anchored belief that it's one of the best places to learn and grow.

It's essential that all staff buy into this positive narrative, as any dissenting opinions can undermine these efforts. Consistently projecting enthusiasm and optimism about the school can strengthen students' desire to stay, reducing the lure of transferring to other institutions.

## **Neurotransmitters: The Brain's Natural Rewards**

Teenagers are driven by neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine, and oxytocin, which reward positive social interactions and achievements. By recognising students' efforts, connecting with them personally, and fostering a supportive environment, educators can tap into these natural rewards. Simple gestures, like high-fives or verbal affirmations, can create an atmosphere of trust and connection. These interactions promote feelings of belonging and happiness, which can be powerful motivators for staying in school.

## **Addressing Sleep Patterns and Scheduling**

An interesting insight Jeremy shares is regarding teenagers' circadian rhythms, which tend to differ from those of adults. Teenagers naturally produce melatonin—a hormone that helps regulate sleep—later in the evening, making it harder for them to fall asleep early and wake up early. Some schools have begun considering later start times for post-16 programs to align with

students' biological clocks, potentially increasing attentiveness and overall academic performance.

For events or important engagements, Jeremy recommends scheduling in the late afternoon or evening, when students are more naturally alert. Hosting special academic events in the evening can also give students a sense of excitement and exclusivity, adding to their engagement and attachment to the school.

## **The Importance of Repetition**

Jeremy also underscores the concept of neuroplasticity, or the brain's ability to adapt and change with repeated information. For information to stick, students need consistent exposure to it. Repetition helps solidify memories and understanding. Educators should regularly revisit important messages about the school's culture, resources, and academic opportunities to reinforce students' long-term retention and positive associations.

## **Emphasising Unique Strengths of Comprehensive Schools**

Jeremy notes that comprehensive schools have unique strengths that selective institutions may lack. He encourages students to take pride in succeeding within a diverse, inclusive environment, as this can reflect positively in university or apprenticeship applications. Comprehensive schools can leverage this distinction to instill confidence and motivation, showing students that their hard work and achievements carry a special significance.

## **Personalised Invitation Days**

Instead of traditional open days, Jeremy suggests holding "invitation days" where students and parents are personally invited to visit the school. This approach makes students feel valued and appreciated, while giving parents a sense of the school's commitment to their child's success. During these visits, small-group tours and personalised attention create a memorable experience that can solidify students' attachment to the school.

## **Conclusion: Building an Inclusive, Engaging School Environment**

Jeremy's insights offer valuable guidance for educational leaders looking to build a more engaging and supportive school environment. By understanding the teenage brain, focusing on early engagement, reinforcing positive messages, and creating unique experiences, schools can enhance student retention and foster a culture of pride and belonging. Through these strategies, educational institutions can help their students succeed, not only academically but also as confident, motivated individuals.