Supporting high school students after a significant absence: a worked example.

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Returning to school after a significant period of absence can be a challenging experience for some students, however with partnership, prior planning, and the right supports in place, schools can support students with this return.

This video will show you an example of how a high school supported a student with their return to school after a significant period of absence.

Through this example, you will learn how to partner with students and their families, consider a student’s strengths and areas they may need support in, and how evidence-based strategies can be applied by families, teachers and the learning and support team, to support students during their return to school.

Micah is a Year 8 student who has recently missed a significant period of school due to illness.

The Learning and Support Team and Year Advisor have a number of steps planned to support Micah with his return to school.

An online meeting is scheduled with Micah, his family, his year advisor, the learning and support team, and a health professional involved in his care. Prior to the meeting, Micah’s personalised learning and support plan is shared so each stakeholder can consider what information may be important to consider during his return, and what may have changed and needs revising.

Micah’s personalised learning and support plan describes his strengths, as well as areas where adjustments are needed to support his engagement at school.

He is a very competitive and enthusiastic participant in sports and physical education class.

He shows high motivation during class discussions and group activities, and when learning with interactive or visually engaging material.

Micah isn’t particularly close to any specific students, but joins in with different peers during breaks based on who is playing sports or other competitive activities.

Micah tends to lose focus when asked to read or write more than a half page of text. He can become frustrated, anxious or distressed when the learning environment is not structured and calm. At times, when a specific class has been consistently loud or unstructured, he has avoided attending class by turning up at the sick bay, or asking to stay home on the days that class is scheduled. Sometimes he refuses to participate in learning activities, so flexibility and adaptability from teachers is needed to identify strategies to re-engage him in his learning.

During the meeting, the health professional identifies that:

Micah is still recovering from his illness. Partial attendance and a reduced workload to support his rest and recovery at home is recommended.

He is not able to participate in physically exerting tasks for the first two weeks, including participating in sports. When he resumes physical activity, he will need to start slow and gradually increase his level of activity over two months.

To support Micah’s health and recovery, he will attend school until the end of lunchtime for the first week of his return, with the length of his days being increased as he is ready. The year advisor will liaise with the timetable coordinator to see if some room changes can be made to reduce the distances he needs to walk between classes. Micah will be provided with the option to either access a quiet space to rest during physical education classes, or to participate in the lesson within the limits set by his health team.

Micah will need an adjusted program so that his workload is not too demanding when he initially returns. Strategies that may support an adjusted program are identified from Micah’s personalised learning and support plan.

The following strategies are agreed to:

Micah’s teachers will identify key learning outcomes for Micah, and develop an adjusted learning program.

Micah’s teachers will limit work involving reading or writing, and instead offer hands-on, group-based, or engaging multimedia resources.

Given he has missed content, an SLSO will work with groups of students to allow teachers time to provide one-to-one support to Micah with missed content.

Regular check-ins with Micah and his parents will help his teacher track how he is travelling with his learning and workload.

All of these strategies will be documented in his plan.

During the online meeting, Micah and his parents outline some other changes and concerns they have about the return to school.

Micah states that he has no friends. When asked about this, he explains that no-one from his class contacted him while he was absent. He says that he does not want to return to school, and becomes increasingly anxious when the return is discussed.

Micah’s personalised learning and support plan identifies that he previously connected with peers through sports, which may create some challenges for him given he is not currently permitted to be physically active.

During the meeting, they brainstorm other interests he has. Micah mentions he enjoys online games at home, and agrees to reconnect with peers online prior to his return. His parents will look for opportunities to organise some in person catch ups with some of the peers he reconnects with online.

The following school strategies are agreed on:

The year advisor will ask two or three classmates who Micah previously got along well with to make sure he is included during the day.

They also talk about different lunchtime activities available, and Micah chooses two that he will go to if he can’t find any peers to spend his lunchtime with.

Finally, teachers will use group discussion and group projects to support his connection with peers and foster all students’ capacity to work effectively with others. Teachers will be encouraged to allocate groups during classes, so that Micah is placed with peers he can connect with.

Given Micah is resistant to returning to school, it is agreed that the following strategies and supports may make the return to school feel more manageable for him.

The year advisor will provide Micah with his timetable and a clear and simple overview of his return, including the supports and strategies available to him.

Micah will be provided with access to wellbeing support through the school counsellor, and a safe and low stimulation space that he can access when needed.

The Learning and Support Team and year advisor will work with teachers to ensure a coordinated and consistent approach to his return.

One of the teachers who developed good rapport with Micah will be available for the first few mornings of his return to provide support.

All teachers will email Micah to reconnect with him, let him know they are looking forward to having him return, and to let him know how he can communicate with them if he needs more support.

Teachers will create calm and structured classroom environments, respond flexibly and adaptably when Micah is resistant to participating, and will schedule and allow for brief breaks where needed.

Through partnering with Micah and his family, understanding the strengths and strategies that have previously worked well for him, reviewing what new challenges or strategies may be relevant to the return to school, and activating supports across home and school that build on his strengths, Micah’s school has provided him with a supportive, consistent and structured transition process. While these plans may need to be adapted throughout the transition process, ongoing partnership with Micah and his family will continue to provide opportunities to feel safe and supported in his return to school.

Strategies implemented for Micah support the learning and wellbeing of all students. Providing these options for everyone improves the inclusive environment.

So to recap, when supporting a student who is returning to school after a significant period of absence:

Partnership with the student and their family provides opportunities to identify the evidence-based strategies and supports that are most relevant for that specific student.

Through actively identifying a student’s strengths, schools can develop strategies that build on student capabilities.

Communication and collaboration between all those involved in a student’s education and care provides the structure, predictability and consistency across settings that students need to navigate changes with a sense of security.