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Restoring order in classroom

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Nine minutes. That's how much of every half-hour lesson is being lost, on average, to student misbehaviour.

A national survey of more than 370 teachers puts a number on something most educators already feel; almost a third of teaching time swallowed by disruption. Across a school year, it's roughly 12 weeks of lost learning.

We shouldn't minimise what that means for teachers trying to teach and for the kids trying to learn around the disruption. But there's another question worth asking; what was happening for those students before they even walked into the room?

Misbehaviour is loud. A student talks over a teacher, refuses to work, lashes out, and disrupts the kids around them. What's much harder to see is what came before it – a student losing their sense of connection to school, struggling to regulate

their emotions, or just no longer feeling like they belong there.

None of this excuses poor behaviour. Teachers deserve classrooms where they can teach. Students deserve classrooms where they can learn.

But classroom management and earlier identification aren't rivals. They're both necessary, and right now schools are leaning almost entirely on the first while the second goes largely unbuilt.

Here's the core problem: most of the data schools collect tells us what's already happened. It records details like absences, behaviour incidents and falling grades, and then we respond. In other words, we're great at explaining disengagement after the fact, and much worse at catching it while there's still time to act.

Between January 2022 and August this year, Life Skills GO collected more than 18 million student check-ins across more than 1000 Australian schools. And what this data revealed is

that simply and consistently asking students how they're going unearths things that attendance data and behaviour logs miss.

A child who suddenly withdraws might need boundaries, but they might also need someone to notice that something's changed. A student missing school repeatedly may need an attendance intervention, but we should also want to know why the gate feels hard to walk through.

The numbers on lost teaching time should worry every parent, teacher and education minister in the country. But the numbers only tell us what's going wrong – they don't tell us why. Getting those lost minutes back means paying attention to the weeks before the lesson, not just the time when it begins to fall apart.

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