Don’t Leave

Understanding Student Retention in English Language Schools in Japan

Data Driven Insights for School Owners and Educators

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AAS PRESS

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1 Introduction

Why do students leave English language schools in Japan before achieving meaningful results, and what can schools realistically do about it?

Over the past few years, I have had the opportunity to travel around Japan visiting teachers and schools, running workshops, speaking at conferences, and spending time with educational companies both large and small that use AAS Press materials. Through this work, I have made many friends in the industry and had long conversations with people who have spent decades teaching, managing, and building schools. Many of them are generous with their time and open about their experiences.

Across these visits and conversations, one question comes up again and again. Why do some students quit too early?

This question matters on a personal level. Most people working in English education care deeply about their students, and it is painful to see motivated learners disappear before they have had the chance to make real progress. It also matters on a business level. Every student who leaves reduces revenue, increases uncertainty, and makes it harder to plan for the future.

I decided to write this ebook because this question sits at the centre of success in our industry, whether success is defined financially or in terms of educational impact. Despite its importance, there is a surprising lack of reliable, data backed answers. I regularly read industry reports and purchase white papers on trends in English education in Japan. While these resources are useful, they rarely address student retention in a way that reflects the daily realities of language schools.

I have also explored what current AI tools can offer on this topic. They provide sensible general insights, but they are not grounded in the specific structures, pressures, and constraints of English language education in Japan. This book is an attempt to bridge that gap by combining data, practitioner voices, and direct observation from within the industry itself.

2 Definition of Terms

This book draws on ideas from education, business, and data analysis. As a result, it uses some terms that may feel more at home in a marketing textbook than in a classroom. Before defining them, it is worth acknowledging that this language can feel uncomfortable, especially for people who came into this field as teachers.

As a teacher, words like customer acquisition, and customer lifetime value give me a slightly negative reaction. Many of the students at our schools are children. Even when they are adults, most of us think of them as learners, not customers. We do not meet them once, take their money, and move on. We see them every week, watch them struggle, improve, gain confidence, and sometimes lose it again. Referring to that relationship in purely commercial terms can feel wrong.

The term that bothers me the most is Customer Lifetime Value. There is something unsettling about language that sounds like it places a monetary value on the lifetime of a student who has trusted us with their English education. That is not how teachers think about their work, and it is not how this book approaches students.

That said, these terms are widely used in discussions about school management and sustainability. Ignoring them does not make the underlying realities disappear. For that reason, I use them here in a limited and practical way, with clear definitions and without losing sight of the human relationships behind the numbers.

Customer Acquisition Cost (CAC)
Customer Acquisition Cost refers to the total cost required to enrol a new student. In the context of English language schools, this includes advertising, promotional campaigns, trial lessons, staff time, and other resources used to attract and convert prospective students. While the term itself feels impersonal, the underlying idea is simple. Schools invest time and money before a student ever sets foot in a classroom.

Customer Lifetime Value (CLV)
Customer Lifetime Value is an estimate of the total revenue a student generates during their time at a school. In practice, for language schools, CLV is closely tied to how long a student continues studying and how consistently they attend. Used carefully, this concept helps illustrate an important point. Schools that support students over the long term tend to be more stable and better able to reinvest in teaching quality, staff, and learning environments.

Retention Rate
In this book, retention rate is defined as the number of years a student continues studying at the same school. This definition is intentional. Language learning takes time, and retention measured only in percentages compared to turnover rate can obscure whether students remain long enough to achieve meaningful results. Measuring retention in years keeps the focus on long term learning rather than short term enrolment.

3.Student Retention Is Important to Students Themselves

It is my view that it is a disservice to students when they begin learning English but leave too early to gain the full benefit of their time at a school. This is not simply a matter of incomplete study. There are long term consequences for how students relate to English and to learning itself.

Learning a language takes time and sustained commitment. Short periods of study can be enjoyable and motivating, but they are rarely enough to produce lasting ability. Age plays a significant role in what happens when learning stops. Very young learners, in particular, are unlikely to retain much of their language ability without continued study or regular exposure.

For example, kindergarten aged students who leave English education before elementary school often lose most of their English within a few years. This can happen even when they reached a high level of fluency in immersion style programs. As they grow older, these students may remember their

English classes fondly, but many also experience frustration or disappointment when they realise they can no longer use the language they once spoke with ease.

For learners of any age, leaving before reaching a point of being able to independently use English can have a different but equally serious effect. Students who quit too early may begin to see themselves as unsuccessful language learners. They may think, “I tried, but it was too hard,” or develop a more fixed mindset such as, “I am not good at learning languages.” These beliefs can persist for years and influence whether students are willing to try again in the future.

If these are the outcomes of a student’s time at an English school, then the school is not fulfilling its role as an educational institution. Schools do not simply provide lessons. They shape learners’ beliefs about what is possible for them.

The same ideas can be expressed more positively. When students stay at a school long enough to develop real skills, the effects are cumulative. They gain confidence in their ability to communicate, begin to see themselves as capable language users, and carry that identity into other areas of their lives. In this sense, student retention is not just a business metric. It is closely tied to whether students leave with a sense of growth and possibility, or with the feeling that language learning is something that is not for them.

4.Student Retention Is Important for Schools as Businesses

English language schools in Japan operate in an increasingly challenging environment. Many of the pressures facing schools today are structural and long term, and few of them can be solved through marketing alone. In this context, student retention becomes one of the most important factors determining whether a school can remain stable and sustainable.

One of the most significant challenges is demographic. Japan’s declining birthrate means that the pool of potential new students is shrinking year by year and competition between schools for enrolments continues to intensify. Under these conditions, relying on a constant flow of new students is both expensive and increasingly unreliable.

Recruiting new students also carries a clear cost. Advertising, promotional campaigns, trial lessons, and staff time all require investment before any tuition is collected. When students leave after a short period, these costs are difficult to recover. By contrast, retaining existing students typically requires far fewer resources. Even small improvements in how long students stay can have a disproportionate effect on overall revenue and financial stability. Later in the case study section you will find that schools with the highest student retention rates can actually bring their CAC down to zero.

Retention also contributes to predictability. Schools with stable student populations are better able to plan staffing, scheduling, and curriculum development. This stability reduces stress on teachers and

administrative staff and allows schools to focus on improving educational quality rather than constantly reacting to enrollment fluctuations.

Over time, schools that succeed in retaining students are also more resilient. They are less dependent on short term marketing tactics and less vulnerable to sudden changes in the market. In an industry facing demographic decline and rising costs, the schools that endure are likely to be those that can support students over the long term, not those that simply attract the most new enrolments.

Importantly, these business outcomes do not stand in opposition to educational goals. Schools that help students stay long enough to achieve meaningful results are better positioned to survive financially. In this sense, student retention aligns the interests of learners, teachers, and school owners. It is not a trade off between values and viability, but a shared foundation for both.

What the Numbers Say

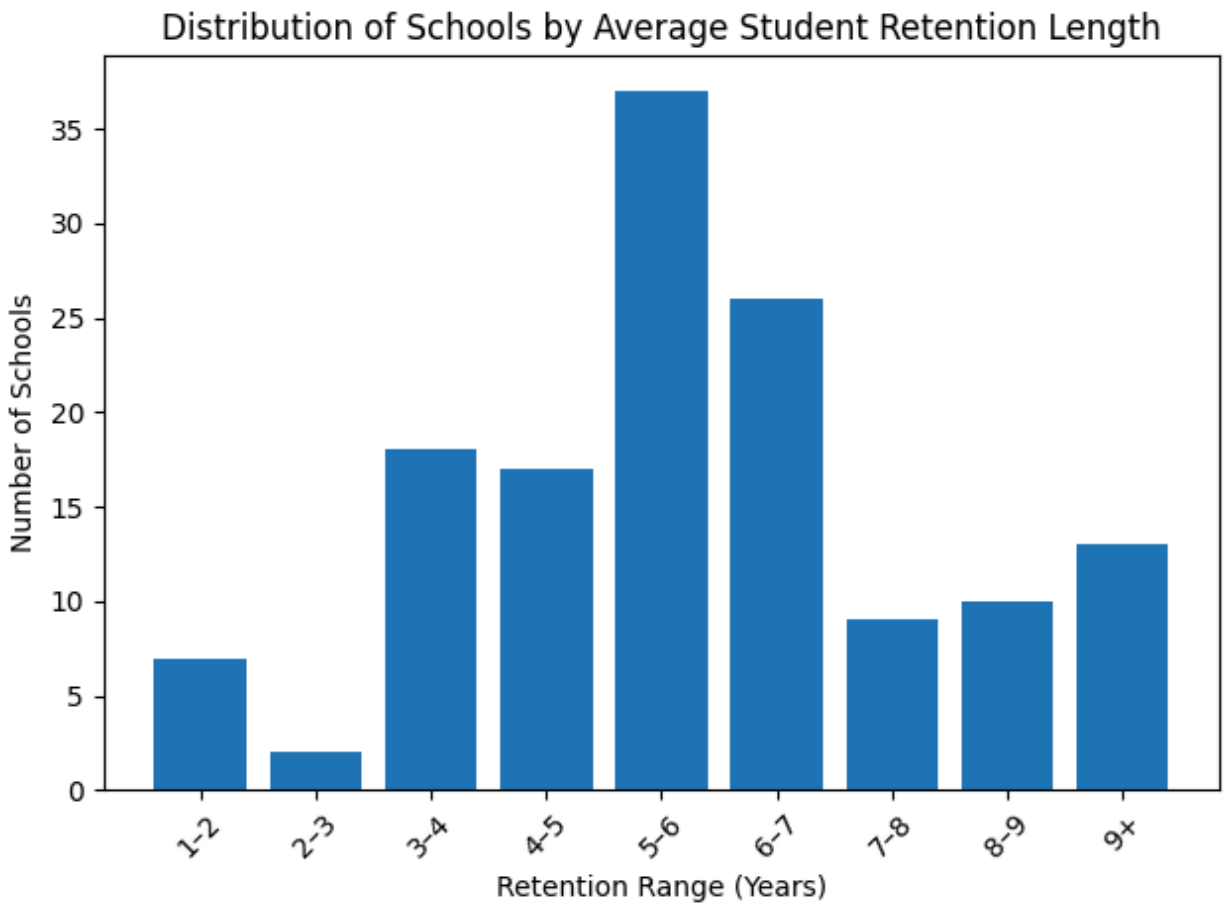
This chapter draws on survey data collected from English language schools in Japan. The main dataset consists of 147 responses from school owners and managers. The data is self reported and reflects what respondents believe is typical at their school rather than what was extracted directly from enrollment databases. The sample is also weighted toward independently owned eikaiwa style schools, with fewer responses from international schools, juku, and other program types. It is worth mentioning that there were a few respondents that were among the largest scale English Education companies in Japan.

These limitations are important to acknowledge. At the same time, the consistency of many responses suggests that the data captures real and familiar patterns within the industry. The numbers do not provide definitive answers on their own, but they do help clarify where retention pressure is strongest and where further investigation is needed.

Average Retention Across the Sample

When schools were asked how long students typically remain enrolled, the most common answers were five and six years. Across the full sample, the average retention length was slightly above five years, with five years as the middle value.

This suggests that many schools succeed in building longer relationships with students. However, this average also masks significant variation. Some students stay much longer, while others leave well before reaching a point of independent or confident language use. To understand why, it is necessary to look at when students join, when they leave, and what happens in between.

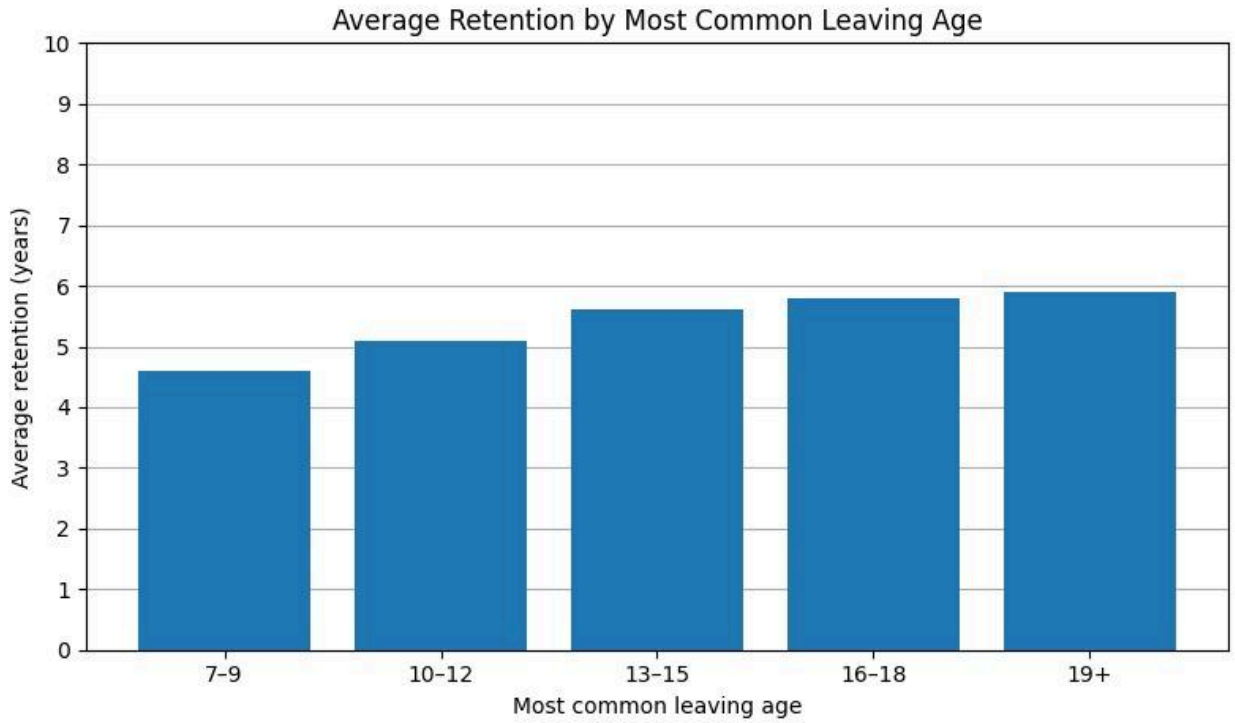


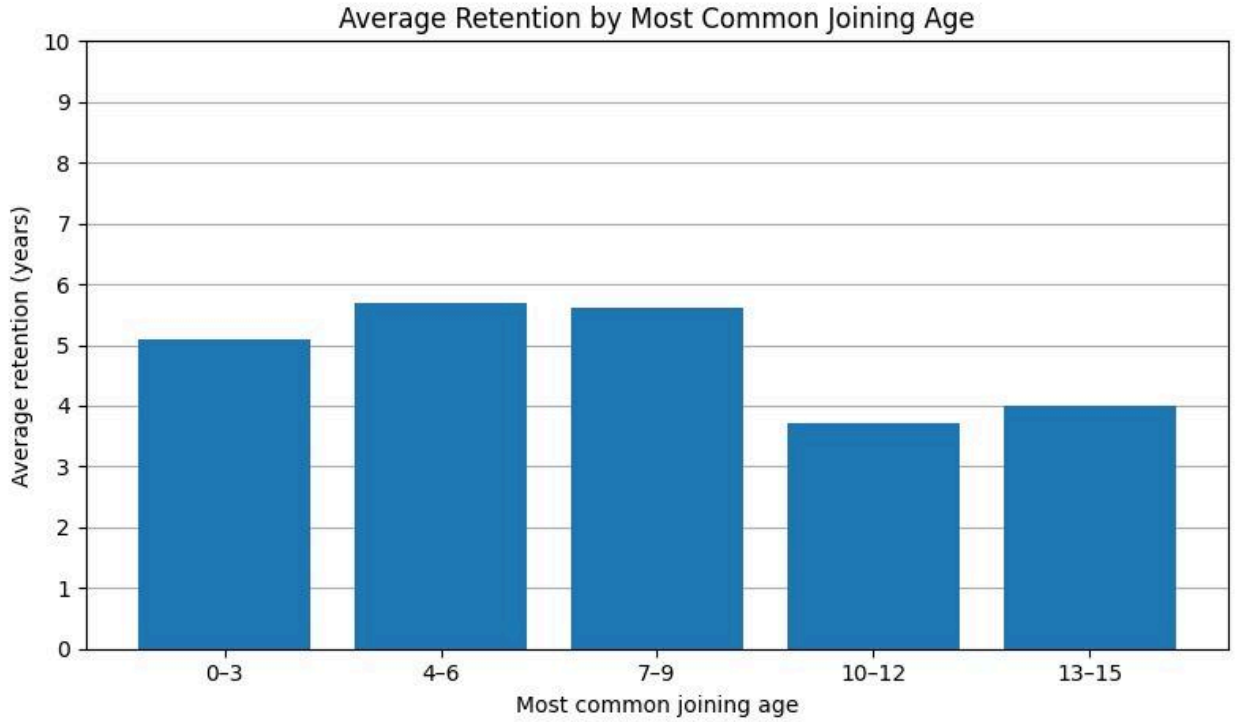
Joining Age and Leaving Age

Schools reported that students most commonly begin studying English between four and six years old. In other words, many schools establish the relationship at kindergarten age.

Leaving ages show a much tighter and more revealing pattern. Responses cluster strongly around late elementary school and early junior high. The most common reported leaving ages were ten to twelve and thirteen to fifteen.

This pattern appears repeatedly across different school sizes and types. Students often begin early, study for several years, and then leave during a period of increasing academic and scheduling pressure. This timing is consistent enough to suggest that retention challenges are





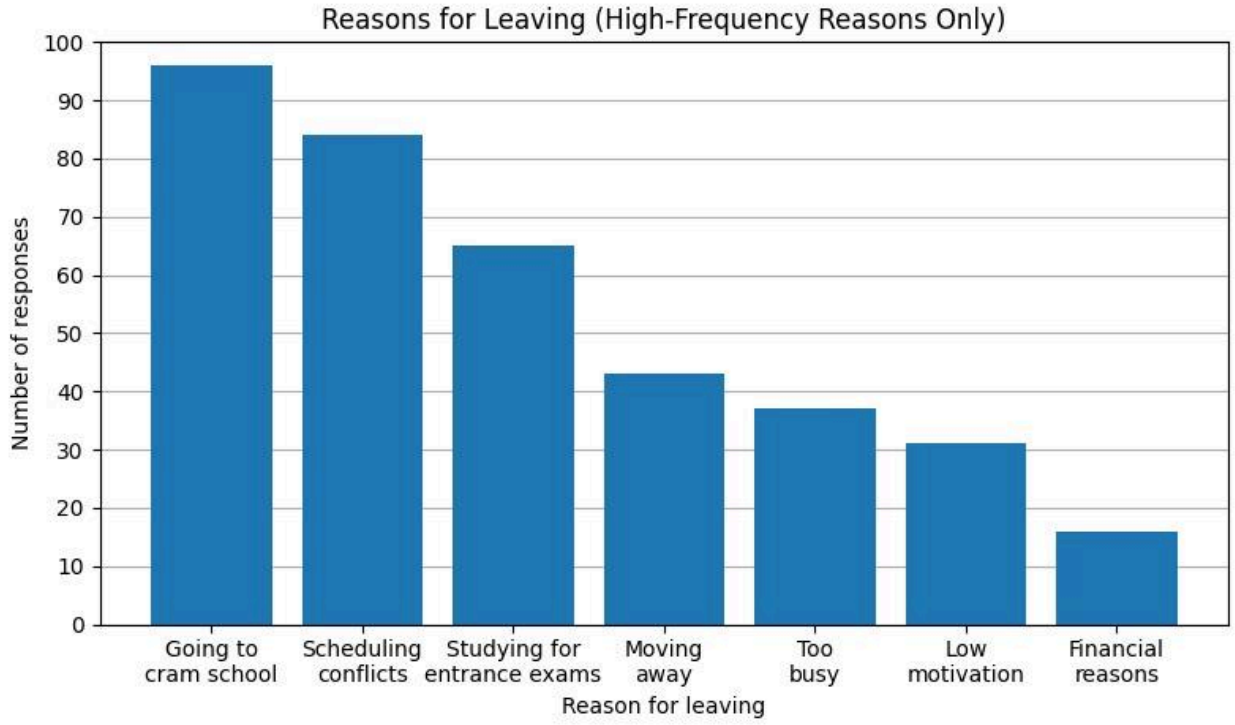
not random, but linked to predictable transitions within the Japanese education system.

Reasons Students Leave

The reasons schools reported for students leaving align closely with the age patterns above.

The most frequently cited reason was going to cram school. Closely following were scheduling conflicts with other activities and studying for entrance exams. Other commonly mentioned reasons included moving away, being too busy, and low motivation.

What is notable here is that dissatisfaction with teaching quality or curriculum does not appear as a dominant reason. Instead, most departures are framed as the result of competing priorities and structural pressure on students and families. This distinction matters. It suggests that improving retention is not only about improving lessons, but also about how schools respond to external constraints.



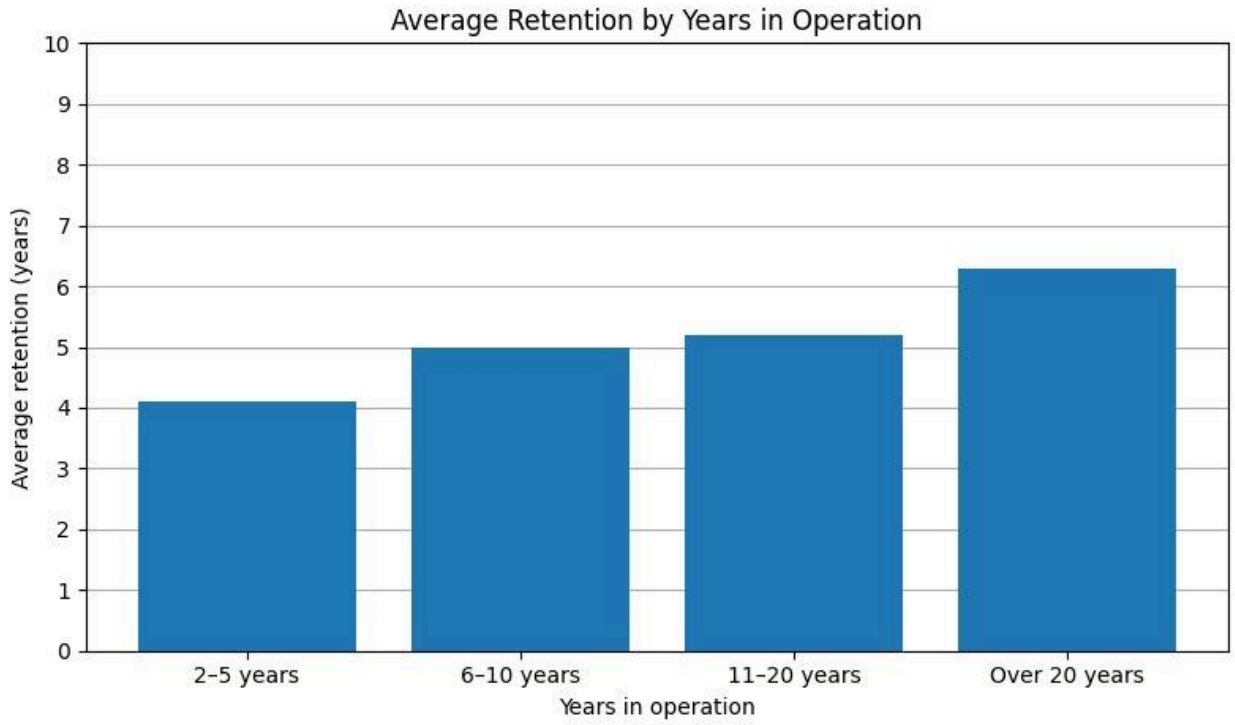
Retention and Years in Operation

One of the clearest relationships in the data appears when retention is compared with how long a school has been operating.

Schools that have been in operation for over twenty years reported higher average retention than newer schools. On average, these long established schools reported retention of more than six years, compared to lower averages among younger schools.

This does not mean that age alone causes better retention. However, it suggests that schools with long operating histories may have developed systems, expectations, and community relationships that support students staying longer. It may also reflect survival bias. Schools that fail to retain students over time may be less likely to remain in operation for decades.

Regardless of cause, the pattern is consistent enough to warrant attention.



School Size, Type, and Feedback Practices

Other comparisons in the dataset are less straightforward. Retention varies by school size and type, but the differences do not form a single clear story. Similarly, schools report a wide range of practices around tracking retention and collecting feedback.

In some cases, schools that report very frequent feedback collection also report lower average retention. This does not imply that feedback causes students to leave. More likely, it reflects differences in student age, program intensity, or how schools interpret the idea of feedback itself.

These results highlight the limits of survey data. Some relationships are suggestive but not conclusive, and they should be treated as prompts for further inquiry rather than firm findings.

A Note on Academically Focused Schools and Juku

In addition to the main dataset, a smaller set of responses was collected from academically oriented English schools and juku. This second dataset includes only eight responses and cannot support statistical claims. However, it provides a useful contrast.

Despite differences in positioning and curriculum, these schools reported patterns that closely mirror those seen in the larger sample. Students most commonly left between ten and fifteen years old, and the dominant reason given was preparation for entrance exams. Scheduling pressure and fatigue from other academic commitments were also frequently mentioned.

Several respondents noted that retention improved when schools were able to clearly explain the value of continuing English study during exam focused years. Rather than rejecting English itself, students and parents appeared to prioritise subjects perceived as more directly linked to exam success.

Although limited in scale, this comparison suggests that retention challenges are shaped less by school type and more by shared structural pressures within the education system.

What the Numbers Suggest and What They Do Not

Taken together, the data points toward a consistent picture. Many schools succeed in enrolling students at a young age. Many of those students then leave during a predictable window when academic pressure, cram school attendance, and scheduling conflicts intensify.

Questions that remain unanswered that we will research in follow up surveys are the impacts of:

- Area & location
- Prices
- Staff and teacher training
- Teacher turn over rates

Another point that the numbers do not tell us about is why some schools manage to retain students through these transitions while others lose them at the same stage. They also cannot explain how communication, identity, expectations, and community influence student decisions over time.

Those questions require listening to practitioners and examining lived experience. The following case studies explore those dimensions in detail.

Introduction to Case Studies

The numbers in the previous chapter outline a clear pattern, but they do not explain how individual schools experience and respond to it. Survey data can show when students tend to leave and what pressures are most often involved, but it cannot capture how decisions are made in practice, or why

some schools are able to retain students through the same transition points that cause others to struggle.

To explore those questions, the following section turns away from aggregated data and toward individual voices. The case studies that follow are based on extended conversations with school owners and practitioners working in different contexts within English education in Japan. Each offers a concrete perspective on how retention challenges appear on the ground, and how schools interpret, adapt to, and overcome them.

Together, these cases help illuminate the human and organisational factors that sit behind the patterns seen in the data.

Case Study 1: Brian Shepherd from i2i

School Context and Growth

Brian Shepherd runs i2i in Yamanashi, a relatively rural area where families often drive long distances and the overall number of children has been shrinking for years. He opened the school in 2008 in a building he had constructed with three classrooms, starting with about 75 students. Today, the school serves roughly 340 students and operates a second branch about 45 minutes away.

Despite demographic decline in the region, the school continues to grow, albeit more slowly than before. Brian attributes this continued growth primarily to word-of-mouth reputation and long-term relationships with families rather than aggressive marketing or numerical optimization.

Brian’s Perspective on Student Retention

Brian does not describe himself as data-driven and intentionally avoids framing retention as a purely numerical problem. He believes that focusing too heavily on metrics risks turning students into numbers rather than individuals. Instead, retention is viewed as a byproduct of strong relationships, trust, and a school culture where students and families feel genuinely connected.

At the same time, the school is very aware, through experience, of when students are most likely to leave, and it actively designs programs to support students through those transition points.

The Grade 3/4 Drop-Off Problem

In earlier years, the school saw students leaving around third or fourth grade. Brian believes this is the age when parents begin narrowing down activities, as sports, music, and cram schools become more serious and time-consuming. English, if it remains a once-a-week activity without a clear sense of progression, often loses out.

Rather than competing directly with other activities, the school decided to change what English looked like at this stage.

The Explorers Program: A Retention Turning Point

The Explorers program was created for students in grades four through six and has become central to the school's retention strategy. Students continue their regular English lessons, but also participate in an additional experiential session each week and a monthly "expedition." These expeditions include activities such as outdoor trips, camps, cooking, science projects, and seasonal events.

Students prepare for each expedition in advance, keep journals, and write reflections afterward. The program also emphasizes character development through a framework called the "6Cs," focusing on skills beyond vocabulary and grammar.

Brian believes this program works because it matches students' developmental needs at that age and offers something distinctly different from both standard English classes and cram school.

Identity, Belonging, and Motivation

A recurring theme in Brian's explanation is identity. Explorers wear a special T-shirt at events and are presented as role models for younger students. This creates a clear sense of progression. For students at i2i, being an Explorer is something to aspire to.

As students begin to see themselves as English users or as members of a special group, motivation shifts from external (parents enrolling them) to internal (a sense of who they are). Brian points to the fact that almost all students who took Eiken at one point were Explorers, even though the program does not explicitly focus on test preparation. To him, this suggests that identity and confidence play a significant role in students choosing to push themselves academically.

Retention Into Junior High and High School

Although Explorers is optional, Brian estimates that around 30 to 40% of eligible students join. Despite the fact that not all students join the program, it has had a school-wide impact. Before the program, the school had very few junior high students. Afterward, junior high enrollment increased significantly, and many of those students continued into high school.

When Brian looks at the students currently staying through high school, nearly all of them participated in Explorers. He believes the program builds emotional bonds and shared memories that make students reluctant to leave, even when other options might seem more practical or economical.

Proactive Transitions and Program Design

The school does not wait for students to decide what comes next. At the end of third grade, families receive a formal invitation to learn about Explorers, framing it as a milestone rather than an add-on.

In sixth grade, students are invited to try junior high classes in January or February, well before graduation. For junior high, students can choose conversation classes, grammar classes, or both. Grammar classes are taught by Japanese teachers using juku-style materials aligned with school tests and Eiken, while conversation classes focus on communication and confidence.

Brian acknowledges that junior high students often become quieter and harder to engage, but he notes that many regain confidence and willingness to speak once they reach high school.

Teachers and Social Connections

Teacher staffing is another important factor. The school employs young, energetic teachers whom teenagers perceive as relatable and “cool,” which helps maintain engagement. Brian contrasts this with his own role as an older teacher, noting that different ages naturally create different types of relationships.

He also emphasizes the importance of peer relationships. Students are often placed with classmates they have known since elementary school, and the school provides a social space where students can meet friends outside of their regular school environment—something he believes is especially valuable during adolescence.

The Role of Physical Space

The main school includes a café-style lobby where older students often stay for 30 to 60 minutes after class. This space encourages informal interaction and strengthens students' sense that the school is a place they belong, not just a place they attend.

Brian contrasts this with the newer branch, which opened during COVID. Because parents waited outside and students moved quickly in and out, the culture of lingering and connection never fully developed. As a result, staff are concerned that students at that branch may be more likely to leave at the junior high transition.

Communication, Evaluation, and Parent Trust

Clear communication with parents is another pillar of retention. In elementary school, the curriculum is divided into three terms, each ending with a level check. Parents are notified in advance and encouraged to support review at home. The level checks are mostly interview-based and intentionally non-competitive, using simple evaluations rather than rankings.

If a student is struggling, the school contacts parents directly to address issues such as behavior or homework. Brian explains that this system developed in response to early feedback from parents who felt that classes looked like "just playing" and couldn't see progress. By introducing textbooks, light homework, frequent evaluation, and visible reporting, the school increased parental confidence and reduced withdrawals.

Summary

Brian Shepherd's i2i school in rural Yamanashi demonstrates how long-term student retention can be driven by identity, belonging, and program design rather than data-driven management alone. A key turning point was the introduction of the Explorers program for upper elementary students, created in response to a significant Grade 3/4 drop-off. By combining experiential learning, character development, and strong group identity, the program reframed English study from a weekly lesson into a meaningful developmental experience. Proactive transition planning, balanced academic and communicative junior high options, relatable teachers, and a physical space designed for social connection further strengthen retention. The case suggests that sustained enrollment is closely linked to students developing a sense of identity and belonging within the school community, supported by clear communication and visible progress for parents.

Case Study 2: Claire Sezaki from Sunshine English School

Context

Claire Sasaki is founder of **Sunshine English School**, a long-established school owner in **Kumamoto Prefecture**. Sunshine English School is a great example of a school that has mastered the student retention problem. Students nearly all stay for 9 years, from grade 1 through the end of junior high school, a time when many schools struggle with long-term retention.

Local Demographics and Market Conditions

Claire works in a **mid-sized rural city (about 62,000 people)**, and she describes the local demographic trend as sharply declining. Student-age populations are shrinking, and the area is aging quickly. Despite this, Claire emphasizes that her school's reduced student count is not primarily a "demographics problem." Instead, it reflects deliberate choices about school size and lifestyle.

The town still has meaningful educational competition. There are **jukus**, major chains like **ECC** and **Peppy Kids**, and several small independent schools. There is also a local academic "pressure point": the area has a **selective combined junior high + high school**, and families compete to enter it from late elementary school. At the same time, the local public junior high historically had a strong sports culture—though school-run clubs have changed due to teacher shortages, with more outside coaches now taking leadership roles.

A Deliberate Shift Toward a Boutique School Model

Claire explains that her school peaked at around **150 students just as COVID began**, but she decided she did not want to keep growing. As her children got older and became more independent, she shifted away from using part-time teachers and returned to teaching primarily by herself.

To make that possible without losing income, she intentionally reduced class size (from **8 to 6**) while also raising fees. Her longer-term goal is a “boutique” model: fewer students, potentially longer lessons, and higher quality. She specifically mentions moving junior high lessons from **60 minutes to 75 minutes**, starting the following April.

The Core Retention Strategy: A Closed, Cohort-Based System

Claire’s biggest differentiator—and the thing that shapes everything else—is that she **only accepts new students in Grade 1**. No kindergarten classes, and no entry after Grade 1.

This creates a structure where students move through the program as a cohort, year after year, with no beginners inserted later. Claire strongly believes mixing late-joining beginners into established classes creates level and motivation issues, so her program is designed to avoid that completely.

Because entry is limited and structured, her school naturally develops a reputation for being “hard to get into.” Claire doesn’t describe it as intentional exclusivity, but the rules produce that effect. Families cannot “quit and return,” and if they leave, they are out permanently. Students usually keep the same lesson day and time for years, and families are told up front to treat that day as their fixed “English day.”

This design removes many of the scheduling and class-placement stresses that often trigger withdrawals at other schools.

Screening, Fit, and the Role of “Saying No”

Claire doesn’t describe herself as turning families away aggressively, but she is very clear about fit. She explicitly warns parents not to join if they expect their child’s schedule to become overloaded with activities or if they only plan to stay a short time.

She also discourages families who expect to move away within a few years, because the model depends on stable cohorts and long-term continuity. In practice, she rarely sees transfer families anyway because most new students come from existing families—and those are typically local, long-term residents. Word-of-mouth “pre-screens” families before they ever attend a trial lesson.

Enrollment is Built Around Siblings and Referrals

Claire’s intake system reinforces stability and retention:

- Registration opens first for **siblings of current students**, ensuring families can enroll all their children over time.

- Next, current families can invite friends to trial lessons during a limited referral window.
- Only after that does the school open to general interest.

She gives an example where she needed 7 new students, but received 12 sign-ups in the first 30 minutes, meaning recruitment was essentially finished immediately. She spends almost nothing on marketing, and even website inquiries are often irrelevant because classes are already full. This means her **CAC** is essentially zero.

Importantly, she does not use referral gifts or incentives. Families recommend the school because they believe in the program and because they already understand what they're recommending. Claire directly connects this to retention: referrals lead to families joining with realistic expectations and stronger commitment.

Typical Retention Length and What Limits High School Continuation

Claire says the "standard" student journey is **nine years**: Grade 1 through the end of junior high school.

Retention Metrics and the Impact of Not Filling Gaps

Because she only accepts Grade 1 entries, Claire says her retention tracking is unusually simple and unusually "honest." If someone leaves, that gap stays visible permanently because she does not refill it midstream.

She mentions an astounding elementary retention rate around 94% across 6 years, including one cohort affected by COVID disruptions (late start, student anxiety, a couple of dropouts). She also notes that junior high retention is "very high," and that she teaches a comparatively large number of junior high students for a small school around 40–45 junior high + high school students).

Evolution Over 25+ Years: From “Fun Eikaiwa” to Academic English School

Claire estimates her school has existed for **25+ years**, with the current building-based operation reaching about **20 years**. She says retention was not strong at the beginning—as with most schools—but improved significantly as her model solidified and as she made key structural choices (closed classes, limited entry points, stable cohorts).

She also describes a major philosophical shift. Early on she ran larger, fun, low-homework classes. Over time she became much more academic and now describes her school as closer to an “English school” than a traditional eikaiwa.

This change wasn’t just preference—it was shaped by her community. She explains that families in her area generally enroll for two reasons:

1. Many parents are professionals (teachers, licensed specialists) who value English for academic advantage.

2. Many other parents had negative school experiences and want their children to have a better foundation than they did.

Very few enroll for “international” reasons or conversational lifestyle goals.

Responding to the 2021 Curriculum Shift in Junior High

Claire highlights a concrete turning point: when school textbooks and curriculum changed in **2021**, the junior high workload became heavier. She noticed that some lower-level students were suddenly struggling on school tests.

For Claire, this was unacceptable because her students had already studied for six years by that stage. She believed English should be their strongest subject. As a result, she began paying much closer attention to junior high testing demands and ensuring that students could succeed in school assessments.

She now markets a clear promise: even if a student struggles in other subjects, **English should be their best subject** by junior high.

How the Program Progresses Across Grades

Claire describes a structured progression that blends communication, reading development, and gradual academic preparation:

Grades 1–2: Phonics and Oral Communication

The early years are heavily phonics-based. Homework is primarily phonics, and classwork is mostly oral communication supported by phonics skills. She does not introduce a separate textbook until Grade 2.

Grades 3–6: Reading Growth and Academic Foundations

After phonics, students transition into broader reading. Reading becomes central to progress and eventually supports Eiken success.

Eiken as a Whole-Class Milestone

Eiken is used as a cohort benchmark rather than an “extra course.”

- **Grade 4:** Eiken Grade 5 (everyone takes it as a class)
- **Grade 6:** Eiken Grade 4 (again, whole class)
- **Junior High Year 1:** Eiken Grade 3 (whole class milestone)

According to Claire, they have not had a student fail Eiken Grade 5 in decades, because they only test when passing is highly likely and avoid rushing to take the test too early.

The Real “Progress Evidence”: Observation Lessons and Weekly Reading

Claire does not use formal progress reports or frequent testing. Instead, she relies on three main systems that parents can directly see:

Annual Observation Lessons (Elementary Only)

These happen once per year, usually in **February**, with very high attendance (recently close to 100%). Parents observe the lesson and also participate—playing card games, following instructions, and engaging in simple activities with their children.

The observation session ends with Claire explaining what will happen next year, what textbooks will be used, and what goals students are moving toward.

Weekly Reading Homework

Students have reading homework all the way through Grade 6. The “promise” is that children read the homework at least three times with parents, but parents do not need to submit recordings or

logs. Students also read aloud directly to Claire in class so she can confirm genuine reading rather than memorization.

Junior High Progress is Proven Through School Performance

Because there are no observation lessons in junior high, Claire frames school results as the evidence: doing well on tests, doing well on national assessments, and maintaining English as a strength subject.

Parent Communication as a Retention Tool

Claire is extremely direct about expectations. At trial lessons she tells parents clearly: if homework isn't done, she will contact them immediately and persistently. Her view is that homework failure creates a chain reaction—falling behind, reduced enjoyment, and eventual quitting—so she treats it as a retention risk and intervenes early.

Her communication methods are frequent and personal:

- Quick face-to-face comments at pickup/drop-off
- Consistent use of **LINE** for attendance and short messages
- Regular individualized feedback that shows parents she notices their child

She emphasizes that parents value proof that a teacher truly "sees" their child—small specific comments (even simple ones) build trust and deepen commitment.

Community and Belonging Without "Community Programming"

Claire does not intentionally try to create a parent community, and she says she doesn't focus heavily on structured community-building. However, her cohort model naturally creates strong student connections because classmates have been together since Grade 1.

By junior high, students feel safe with each other and are less afraid of embarrassment. She believes this comfort is a major reason students keep coming: they enjoy the group dynamic and have long-standing relationships in class.

Parents also often know each other because recruitment is mostly referrals, but Claire sees that as an organic byproduct rather than a planned strategy.

Events as In-Class Experiences, Not Weekend Commitments

Claire used to run bigger weekend events but shifted away from them for work-life balance and family reasons. Her husband runs a business with busy weekends, so she intentionally protected Saturdays and Sundays.

Now events are integrated into normal class time and count as part of the annual lesson schedule:

- Halloween: merged classes on a regular class day
- Christmas: alternating years (cookies vs games)
- Easter: in-class event

Her reasoning is practical: it keeps workload manageable and ensures every student can participate, regardless of club schedules or outside commitments.

Interestingly, she notes that even though siblings can't attend events, simply hearing about them and seeing the fun still motivates younger siblings to want to join. She also offers a simple diagnostic insight: in small communities, if siblings are not enrolling, it often signals a deeper trust or satisfaction problem.

The Underlying "Formula" Behind Her Retention

Across the interview, Claire's approach to retention is remarkably consistent: she reduces uncertainty, manages expectations early, and designs the school structure so that staying is the natural outcome.

Her retention seems to come from a few reinforcing pillars:

- **Closed cohorts and fixed progression**: families know the path and the standards.
- **Limited entry and "no re-entry" rules**: the school feels valuable and commitment-based.
- **Strong parent expectation-setting**: homework and consistency are not optional.
- **Clear evidence of progress**: observation lessons, reading development, Eiken milestones, and school test success.
- **Stable peer groups**: students grow up together and feel safe in class.

- **Low-friction operations**: events are in-class, communication is simple, and the system is sustainable for the owner.

Claire’s Closing Message

Claire’s final advice is essentially that retention is not mysterious—it is built from clarity and consistency. Schools need to know what they are trying to be, communicate that clearly to parents, and show how the program will deliver what families believe they are buying. If parents do not understand the goal or feel the experience does not match expectations, she believes quitting becomes inevitable.

Case Study 3: Ben Shearon from Cambridge English

Background and Context of the School

Ben Shearon, Director at Cambridge English School, explains that the school began in the early 2000s under unusual circumstances. His wife had been teaching at a children's chain school that abruptly collapsed, leaving teachers unpaid and families without lessons despite having prepaid. Several parents asked her to continue teaching independently, and the school initially operated out of public community spaces before gradually formalizing.

Over time, the school expanded to three locations in Sendai, but following the 2011 tsunami, it consolidated into a single site. Ben describes this consolidation as a turning point: centralizing staff, materials, and administration significantly improved efficiency and ultimately led to higher overall enrollment than when the school operated multiple locations. Today, the school serves roughly 350 students, with an unusually high proportion, around half, being junior and senior high school students.

Why Teen Retention Is Central to the Business Model

Ben is explicit that retention into junior high and high school is not only an educational goal but a financial one. Teen classes are higher margin than elementary classes because they are longer and structured differently. Junior and senior high classes run for over two hours, compared to shorter elementary lessons, allowing the school to deliver more value within a single session.

A key structural decision is the use of interns that are former students, who are now university students. These interns support lessons, help manage activities, and relate well to younger learners because they have completed the same program themselves. This model benefits all parties: interns earn income and continue using English, while the school gains motivated, lower-cost staff who already understand its systems and expectations.

Early Problems with Teen Classes and Curriculum Misalignment

Before redesigning the teen program, the school struggled badly with retention beyond elementary school. At one point, only around a dozen students continued into junior high, and those classes were described as miserable for both students and teachers.

The root cause was curriculum mismatch. The school relied on commercial ESL/EFL textbooks that were not designed for Japanese teenagers. Teachers found the materials difficult to use, and students disengaged quickly. Although these textbooks worked reasonably well with adults or in international contexts, they failed to connect with the realities of Japanese junior high students and their school-based English learning.

The Failed "Extensive Reading Only" Experiment

Ben's first major attempt to fix the problem was to switch junior high classes to an extensive reading model. On paper, the idea seemed ideal: students could read at their own level, progress independently, and benefit from large amounts of input with minimal teacher preparation.

However, this approach failed to address a critical factor: **community**. While extensive reading supported language growth, it did not provide enough interaction. Teenagers, Ben notes, may be shy about speaking English, but they strongly want to socialize, build friendships, and interact with peers. Classes that lacked structured interaction did not give students a reason to keep coming.

The Breakthrough: A Structured Academy Model

The turning point came when the school combined multiple elements into a single, coherent teen program. Each academy class is built around three components:

- **Extensive reading** to support language input and individual progress
- **A dedicated output (speaking) class** focused on active use of English
- **Short juku-style workbook time** aligned with students' school textbooks

This structure allows the school to support both communicative competence and academic performance. The output class is especially important. Ben describes it as closer to a sports practice than a traditional English lesson. Teachers do very little direct instruction; instead, students repeatedly practice the same speaking tasks, rotate partners, and gradually improve over several weeks. By the third week of a cycle, students are encouraged to add detail, ask follow-up questions, and manipulate language rather than simply answering.

A critical classroom management insight is that teenagers must remain constantly active. Downtime leads to disengagement, disruptive behavior, or withdrawal. By keeping students busy with speaking, writing, or timed reading throughout the lesson, the school minimizes discipline problems and maximizes engagement.

Community Built Through Interaction, Not Events

Contrary to common practice, the school does not rely heavily on events or social activities to build community. There are no large student hangout spaces, and events have largely been phased out after proving labor-intensive with limited return.

Instead, community is built directly inside the classroom. Frequent partner changes, repeated interaction, and collaborative speaking tasks ensure that students get to know many peers, even if they did not attend the same elementary classes. This approach allows friendships and group cohesion to develop naturally through shared practice rather than scheduled social activities.

Clear Positioning as an Academic, Long-Term Program

Over time, the school has deliberately narrowed its focus. It now teaches only children, operates on a fixed schedule, and does not offer custom or one-off lesson arrangements. This clarity helps set expectations for families and reinforces the idea that the school is a long-term academic pathway rather than a casual extracurricular activity.

From the first trial lesson, parents are shown the entire journey: materials used in later grades, testing benchmarks, high school outcomes, and even examples of university destinations. Ben explains that the school effectively assumes students will stay long term—and that assumption often becomes self-fulfilling.

Pricing also plays a role. Tuition is set above the local average, particularly for elementary classes, which may discourage casual enrollment but attracts families who are prepared to commit seriously. According to Ben, this positioning helps filter for parents who value continuity and long-term results.

The Critical Retention Lever: Grade 6 January Orientation

The most impactful retention strategy is a structured orientation held in January of sixth grade. Before implementing this, many families assumed that elementary school marked a natural endpoint and quietly left.

The school now uses half of a regular class to hold an in-person session attended by both students and parents. During this session, staff explain how junior high classes work, demonstrate activities, show materials and student work, and clearly outline the enrollment process. Families are asked to submit preferred schedules through a survey, making the transition feel procedural and expected.

Crucially, the messaging frames continuation as the default, logical next step, similar to an “escalator” system used by some private schools. Existing students move forward automatically, while outside students may not have guaranteed access.

Parent Communication and Strategic Conferences

Rather than issuing frequent written progress reports, which Ben believes can sometimes backfire, the school relies on structured, high-impact communication points. These include:

- Annual lesson observation days with briefings from staff
- Regular communication via Line and occasional newsletters
- Scheduled conferences for teen students at key risk points

For junior high students, conferences are timed strategically. First-year students meet individually with staff, while second- and third-year students participate in parent-student-teacher conferences. These years are when quitting is most likely due to academic pressure and increased juku demands. Conferences focus on academic progress, test results, school performance, and future goals, reinforcing the value of staying enrolled.

Testing and Goal Visibility as Retention Anchors

Testing plays a central role in maintaining momentum. All students from grade five onward take Eiken, and results are used diagnostically rather than punitively. The school also offers optional paid Eiken preparation courses, along with free writing and interview practice for test-takers.

Ben emphasizes that recognizable benchmarks matter. While he personally is not a strong advocate of standardized testing, Eiken is widely understood by parents, schools, and students in Japan. Progress toward these goals provides a concrete sense of advancement and helps justify long-term commitment.

Core Philosophy on Retention

Ben concludes that while systems, communication, and community all matter, retention ultimately depends on results. If students are not improving academically, particularly in school English, families will leave regardless of how enjoyable the classes are. Strong retention, in his view, is the natural outcome of clear positioning, visible progress, and a program that aligns closely with students’ real academic needs.

Case Study 4: David Chandler from ABCDAVID'S

ABCDAVID'S 英語スクール

Background and School Profile

David Chandler, founder of ABCDAVID'S, explains that the school grew in a familiar way for many private schools in Japan: starting with teaching in community centers (kouminkan-style settings) and gradually moving into permanent locations. The first dedicated school opened around 2016, and the school expanded significantly after 2019. At the time of the interview, the organization operates four locations and serves close to 800 students, in addition to external accounts such as kindergartens.

The school's core focus is children's education, serving students from infancy through age 18. The business operates primarily in the Osaka area, but the four locations are spread across neighborhoods with noticeably different parent demographics and expectations.

Local Demographics and the Role of Competition

David describes the school's locations as serving mixed communities. In Neyagawa, a suburb of Osaka where two schools are located, the population is divided: some families are strongly education-focused, while others are more sports- and activity-oriented. Even families who prioritize sports still enroll in English, but their expectations are often "once a week, one hour," and parents tend to be less involved in supporting learning at home.

By contrast, the other locations serve communities where parents are more academically oriented. These locations support a stronger bilingual and immersion program demand, and David notes that the clientele is more committed, more invested, and generally more engaged.

In terms of competition, he says large chains (e.g., ECC, Shane, Universal Campus) exist nearby in certain areas, but he sees their presence as beneficial rather than threatening. Their size and corporate structure makes them slower to change; ABCDAVID'S positions itself as family-run, agile, and able to deliver what "big companies can't," adapting quickly to industry and educational shifts.

Two Program Tracks and the "Commitment Gap"

A major theme is that retention is strongly tied to program type. David divides the school into two primary tracks:

- **Standard eikaiwa program** (once a week, one hour)
- **Bilingual / immersion program** (longer, more intensive, higher tuition)

In the bilingual/immersion programs, parents are substantially more invested. David describes the difference in quit rates between the two tracks as "day and night." He attributes this partly to parent mindset. Families in intensive programs tend to view English as a serious educational investment rather than a casual enrichment activity. He also attributes it partly to the practical reality that higher tuition makes parents more motivated to monitor outcomes.

In the regular program, he sees a wider range of family motivations: financial constraints, children having many competing activities (swimming, piano, ballet, etc.), and parents who view English as "nice to have" rather than essential. These factors create a weaker long-term commitment and a more fragile retention profile.

Parent Engagement as a Leading Indicator of Retention

David uses parent participation rates as a visible marker of commitment:

- **Bilingual/immersion families:** near **100% participation** in parent meetings
- **Regular eikaiwa families:** around **50% participation**

This gap matters because it affects the school's ability to reinforce goals, address concerns early, and maintain a shared understanding of progress. In short, the families most likely to stay are also the ones most likely to show up, ask questions, and treat the school as a partner in the child's development.

Communication Systems by Program Type

David explains that communication is intentionally tiered depending on the program:

Regular Eikaiwa Program

Because the majority of students are in the regular program, the school limits communication to approaches that are sustainable at scale:

- **Observation availability in person** (parents can watch through windows/glass doors at any time)
- **Zoom observation** (reduced to once per year due to low attendance)
- **Parent meetings** (once per year)

A key insight is that *offering* communication opportunities is not enough—actual utilization matters. The school reduced Zoom observations because the turnout was too low to justify the operational effort.

David also notes a sharp age-based drop in observation behavior: parents commonly observe from kindergarten through around fourth grade, then observation drops almost "cold turkey," implying that visibility naturally decreases as children get older.

Bilingual / Immersion Program

This track includes everything above, plus higher-touch communication:

- **Twice-yearly written progress reports that are conveyed verbally in an individual session.**
    - at the **6-month** benchmark and **1-year** benchmark
- Reports are written by teachers and supplemented by a manager who leads Parent–Student Relations, especially when behavioral or wellbeing issues require follow-up.

This approach reflects a broader pattern throughout the interview: the more intensive the program, the more structured and proactive the communication—and the higher the retention.

One-on-One Parent Meetings as a Retention Safety Net

One of the most detailed retention practices described is their annual one-on-one parent meeting cycle.

- Meetings are **individual**, typically scheduled in **15-minute slots**

- If needed, families are offered a second, longer follow-up meeting (more face-to-face)

David explains these meetings serve two functions:

1. **Progress clarity:** parents can understand how their child is doing in a private, trusted setting.

2. **Early-warning detection:** the school often learns important context that would not surface otherwise (e.g., changes at home, bullying, family stress).

He explicitly describes these meetings as disaster-prevention: they help identify families who are quietly considering quitting and allow staff to intervene before the decision becomes final.

“Prevention Before Quitting”: Coaching Parents and Students

David gives a concrete example of a common risk scenario: a parent reports that an older elementary child (around grades 4–5) seems to be “losing motivation,” usually shown through resistance to homework.

His interpretation is that the child is not necessarily losing motivation in a deep sense—they are aging, interests are broadening, and the parent is often the one becoming exhausted by daily homework battles. In these cases, the school uses a coaching approach:

- Reframe expectations about child development (older children are not “cute and compliant” like younger kids)

- Help parents understand long-term language acquisition and realistic growth patterns

- Encourage parents to adjust how they support their child: more space, more trust, less constant pressure

Then, with parent permission (which he says is almost always granted), staff speak privately with the child to:

- check wellbeing and needs

- restore perspective on progress (many long-term students forget how far they’ve come)

- motivate through evidence such as progress benchmarks and challenge-based records

David characterizes this work as “a lot of coaching”, not only teaching English, but coaching families through the developmental and motivational challenges that threaten retention.

The Hospitality Model: Everyday Relationship-Building

Outside formal meetings, David highlights a powerful but simple retention driver: **high-quality daily interactions**, especially through trained office staff.

Their office staff training emphasizes hospitality:

- greet students and parents proactively
- notice small positives from class
- mention progress or good moments to parents at pick-up
- speak openly and sensitively when concerns arise

Importantly, David says this is not systematically tracked because it would require too much staffing. Instead, it is built as a cultural habit: staff are trained to look for meaningful moments and share them naturally.

He compares this to high-end service culture, referencing The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company (his former employer) as an example of hospitality that is hard to “systematize” because it must feel genuine. The point is that retention grows when parents feel welcomed, known, and consistently informed, especially in ways that prove the school truly sees their child as a person.

David also shares a guiding mindset: if a family ever leaves and joins another school, he wants them to be able to answer clearly what their child learned, rather than saying, “I have no idea.”

Community-Building Through Events

Unlike some schools that rely on parent lounge areas for community, David emphasizes **events** as the primary community-building engine.

The school is “event heavy,” running:

- major annual events like Halloween and Christmas

- seasonal events such as day trips, summer school and camps
- family-oriented activities where parents, especially for kindergarten-aged children are often **welcome or required**

He describes a deliberate framing tactic: when events happen on Sundays, they are promoted as a "family day" with the school community. This supports working fathers who may only have Sundays off, and creates positive memories that anchor the school emotionally in family life.

He estimates a baseline of **two events per season** (roughly eight per year), often more depending on season.

Retention Tracking, Growth, and Business Perspective

Once David stepped back from daily classroom teaching, the organization began tracking retention more formally. This formal tracking confirmed what he had previously "felt" intuitively: retention was consistently very high.

He acknowledges they lose students like everyone else, but the business continues to grow at around **7–8% per year**, though he implies the organization would like to grow more.

He also reveals a key business mindset: because retention is central, the school aims to maximize value from existing students, especially through program transitions that increase lesson length and pricing. He mentions this directly as maximizing "PPA" (average revenue per active student), using retention as a stabilizer when new inquiries fluctuate.

Teen Retention and Two Critical Transition Points

David identifies two transition stages where schools often lose students and where ABCDAVID'S intervenes intentionally:

1. **4th grade → 5th/6th grade**
2. **6th grade → Junior high school**

Their strategy is early, structured parent education through **setsumekai (orientation sessions)** held annually for these groups:

- **Junior high orientation (6th grade families):** mid-October
- **Upper elementary orientation (4th grade families):** first week of November

He stresses the timing is crucial because juku often begin recruiting early for February start and once a family commits to juku, it becomes difficult to bring them back. Early orientation allows the school to influence decisions before families lock into outside options.

Program Design That “Justifies Staying” Into Junior High

David explains that the curriculum becomes more intensive at each transition:

From 5th Grade (Upper Elementary Track)

- Class time increases from **60 minutes to 90 minutes**
- Adds a **30-minute grammar component**
- Grammar is introduced slowly over two years to prepare students for junior high English

Retention across this transition is extremely high—he cites roughly **90–92% continuation**.

Junior High Program

- Class length increases to **140 minutes**
- Stronger emphasis on measurable results and goals

To compete with juku, they emphasize what their program provides that juku typically does not: ongoing communication, speaking development, and proactive individualized support.

The “Free Grammar Support” Service as a Competitive Advantage

A distinctive retention feature is a complimentary grammar support system:

- Students from **5th grade through junior high** can schedule
- **30-minute sessions**
- semi-private (typically up to **two students per slot**)
- led by teacher assistants

- used for upcoming tests, grammar confusion, Eiken preparation, and general support

Because it is free, it functions as a retention value-add: parents feel their child is supported beyond the main class, and students have access to targeted help without needing external juku.

Data-Driven Proof: Tracking Junior High Test Results

David describes a concrete system for junior high retention: proving outcomes with school test scores.

- Office staff know each local junior high's test schedule
- A week before tests, parents and students are reminded to submit test copies afterward
- Scores are recorded into a spreadsheet

This system provides three benefits:

1. **Motivation and accountability** for students
2. **Diagnostic insight** into common mistakes (e.g., punctuation, capitalization)
3. **A trigger for intervention** when performance drops

They set a benchmark of **80%**:

- below 80% = student flagged "red"
- students in red are required to schedule the complimentary support session
- if a student does not schedule within 1–2 weeks, staff contact parents directly

David emphasizes that parents appreciate this proactive stance because it demonstrates the school cares about real school outcomes, not just enjoyable lessons.

Two Teen Streams: Results-Focused vs. Holistic Bilingual Learning

An important nuance is that the teen experience differs depending on program stream:

- **Standard junior high program:** often results-driven
  (test scores, Eiken level, academic advancement)

- **Bilingual junior high stream:** holistic and project-based
  not centered on tests or Eiken, because those students are already highly motivated and engaged

This distinction reinforces one of the interview's central lessons: retention is not only about "having teens," but about offering pathways that match the student's goals and identity.

Teen Connection, Mentorship, and Emotional Safety

When asked about community among teens, David suggests connection varies by student, but the school actively creates opportunities to build relationships, especially for students facing personal difficulties.

He mentions that some teens who do not attend regular school still attend ABCDAVID'S, and the staff intentionally supports these students by:

- frequent one-on-one conversations

- inviting them to volunteer at events

- giving them meaningful roles where they feel respected and valued

He describes staff as taking an "older friend" role rather than a strict teacher role. They act as someone who listens without judgment. In some extreme cases, he notes the school has supported students experiencing serious emotional distress, and he believes the school's involvement helped stabilize and improve their situation.

This mentorship model also includes strong discretion and trust: students may share personal information that parents do not know, and staff respect student wishes about confidentiality unless escalation is necessary.

The Central Thesis: Retention Is the Result of Genuine Care

At the end of the interview, David summarizes the single biggest driver of their retention:

genuine care—seeing students as people rather than numbers or revenue.

He argues that this value is not sentimental; it drives concrete decisions:

- how staff are trained
- how parents are treated
- how communication is handled
- how programs are built
- how support systems are designed

The “care” philosophy extends to investing in staff development. For example, sending staff to observe hospitality elsewhere and supporting professional development so that the school environment feels like “a different world” to students.

David concludes that retention is not the primary goal so much as a byproduct: when families feel known, supported, and see real progress, staying becomes the natural decision. Retention, in his words, is the “icing on the cake,” a downstream indicator that the school is doing the deeper work correctly.

Synthesis of Case Studies.

What High-Retention Schools Actually Have in Common

At first glance, the four schools featured in this book appear very different. They vary in size, location, target demographics, and instructional philosophy. Some are small and tightly controlled; others are large, multi-site operations. Some minimize events; others rely on them heavily. Some emphasize academic outcomes; others emphasize immersion or holistic development.

Yet when these interviews are read side by side, a striking pattern emerges: high retention does not come from personality, charisma, or luck. It comes from a small number of shared design choices that consistently shape how families experience the school over time.

This chapter examines the common threads that run through all four interviews, followed by the major points where their approaches diverge. Together, these reveal not a single “best” retention strategy, but a set of principles that can be implemented in different ways depending on context.

Retention Is Designed From the Beginning

Across all four interviews, retention is not treated as something to be fixed later. It is designed into the school from the moment a family enters.

None of the owners describe a model where students simply join, enjoy lessons, and eventually decide whether to stay. Instead, each school actively **structures the journey** so that continuation feels natural and expected. This is done through clear entry points, defined progression, and early communication about what comes next.

In several cases, the school explicitly frames continuation as the default. Families are not asked each year whether they want to stay; rather, they are shown what the next stage looks like and guided smoothly toward it. Where quitting does occur, it is treated less as a failure of motivation and more as a signal that expectations, structure, or communication may have broken down.

The shared assumption is simple but powerful: **if quitting is common, something upstream is misaligned.**

Strong Retention Starts With Filtering, Not Persuasion

Another clear through-line is that high-retention schools do not try to appeal to everyone.

Each school has a distinct identity, and that identity naturally filters families. This filtering happens through tuition, class length, scheduling rigidity, workload, and the language used when explaining the program to parents. In every case, there is an implicit message: *this school is for families who want something specific and are prepared to commit to it.*

Importantly, none of the owners describe this as exclusivity for its own sake. Instead, it is presented as alignment. Families who want light exposure, short-term results, or minimal involvement are not pushed away aggressively, but neither are they pursued.

Retention improves not because schools convince hesitant families to stay, but because the families who join already accept the long-term premise of the program, expect certain results and have their expectations met.

Parents, Not Children, Decide Retention

Perhaps the strongest shared insight across all four interviews is that **parents are the real decision-makers in retention**.

Children may complain, lose motivation temporarily, or resist homework, but it is parents who decide whether to withdraw. As a result, every high-retention school in this study invests intentionally in parent communication, though the methods differ.

Some rely on structured observation lessons and orientation sessions. Others emphasize one-on-one meetings, informal daily contact, or office staff interactions. What they share is timing: communication happens *before* dissatisfaction turns into withdrawal.

Rather than waiting for parents to raise concerns, these schools normalize frequent contact and treat questions, doubts, and even frustration as expected parts of a long learning journey. By the time a parent openly expresses a desire to quit, the decision is often already emotionally settled. High-retention schools work to intercept that moment much earlier.

Transitions Are the Danger Zones—and They Are Actively Managed

All four interviews independently identify the same critical risk periods:

- upper elementary (around grades 4–6)
- the transition into junior high
- moments when workload, time commitment, or cost increases

Rather than treating these as unavoidable drop-off points, the schools address them proactively. They hold orientation sessions months in advance, explain exactly how the program will change, and justify those changes with clear reasoning.

In several cases, these sessions are deliberately scheduled *before* families begin considering alternatives such as juku. The logic is straightforward: once a family commits elsewhere, persuasion becomes nearly impossible. Retention is protected by **timing**, not argument. In many cases this means even taking action a year before the “danger zone” comes.

What stands out is that transitions are never treated as surprises. Increased lesson length, added grammar, higher expectations, and higher fees are all framed as logical steps in a long-term plan that parents have already been shown.

Progress Must Be Visible, Not Assumed

Enjoyment alone does not sustain long-term enrollment. Every school in this study provides parents with **visible evidence of progress**, even if the form differs.

Some rely on observation lessons. Others emphasize reading growth, test scores, Eiken benchmarks, or school exam performance. Some use reports and conferences; others use informal but frequent feedback. All four schools in this section had testing as part of the program in the later years.

What matters is not constant testing, but credibility. Parents need concrete proof that their child is moving forward in ways that matter academically, linguistically, or developmentally. High-retention schools choose proof points that parents already understand and trust, such as scores at school or EIKEN results, rather than inventing complex metrics that require explanation.

This visible progress also plays a psychological role: it helps parents persist through inevitable periods when children appear tired, resistant, or less enthusiastic than before.

Transitioning Through Danger Zone Periods

The data shows that students tend to leave at predictable transition points, particularly in late elementary school and early junior high. These are not random departures. They often coincide with shifts in parental expectations and competing academic pressures.

One of the most important insights for improving retention is that expectations change as children grow. What parents value in kindergarten is not what they value in upper elementary school. If a program does not evolve alongside those expectations, families may begin to look elsewhere, even if they have been satisfied for years.

Equally important is timing. Schools must communicate what the next stage will look like before parents begin questioning whether the current program is still appropriate. Waiting until expectations have already shifted is often too late.

Kindergarten: K0 to K3

At the kindergarten level, parents primarily want to see that their children are happy and developing in a healthy way. Enjoyment is central. English is important, but it is part of a broader picture of social and emotional growth.

At this stage, reassurance comes from visible and personal evidence:

- Crafts and take home materials
- Songs that children sing at home
- Classroom observations
- Clear signs that the teacher knows their child as an individual
- Short messages or brief conversations after class

Parents are not typically focused on measurable proficiency. They want to know that their child feels safe, engaged, and positively connected to English.

Lower Elementary: G1 to G3

In early elementary school, enjoyment remains important, but expectations begin to shift. Parents want reassurance that learning is taking place, even if they are not yet fully committed to a long term pathway.

They may begin asking where the program is leading and what progress looks like over time.

At this stage, evidence can include:

- Simple progress reports
- Written homework
- Opportunities for observation

• Clear homework routines
• Short videos or demonstrations of learning

The goal is to show that the program has structure and direction without losing the sense of enjoyment established in earlier years.

Upper Elementary: G4 to G6

By upper elementary, families often begin narrowing down extracurricular activities. Time becomes more limited. English must justify its place among other commitments.

Enjoyment still matters, but parents increasingly look for milestones or tangible evidence of advancement. They want to know what their child is building toward.

Evidence at this stage may include:

• More substantial written homework
• Proficiency testing
• Detailed progress reports
• Clearly defined goals
• Opportunities such as study abroad or external challenges

This is a key danger zone. If the school does not clearly articulate a pathway forward, families may assume that English has reached its natural conclusion.

Junior High: JHS1 to JHS3

In junior high, expectations shift again. Academic performance becomes central. Parents and students are thinking about entrance exams, future study, and long term outcomes.

They expect:

• Measurable progress
• Clear goals
• Higher English scores at school
• Continued communication ability

Evidence becomes more formal and more outcome focused:

• Proficiency tests
• Improved grades at school
• Significant milestones such as study abroad experiences

At this stage, English must compete directly with exam preparation and other academic priorities. Schools that succeed here do not abandon communication in favour of test scores, but they also do not ignore measurable achievement.

Preparing Families Before the Transition

It is not enough to change the type of evidence provided. Families need to be told what to expect before each transition occurs.

When a student moves from kindergarten to elementary school, parents should already understand how the program will evolve. When a student approaches upper elementary, the next phase should be clearly explained. The same applies before entering junior high.

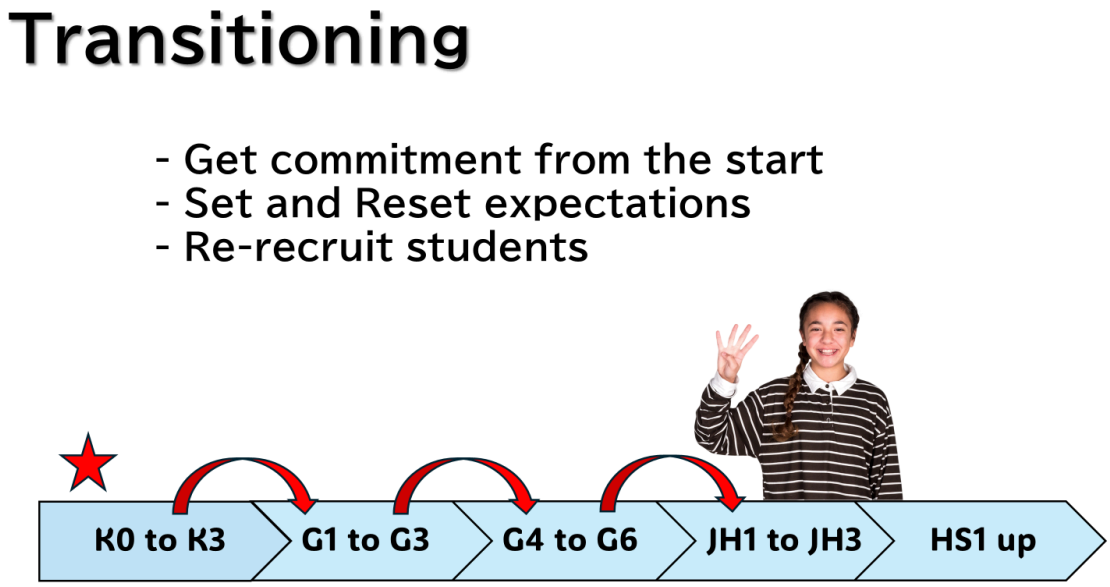
If expectations change silently and the program does not appear to change with them, families may conclude that it no longer fits their needs.

Re-Recruiting at Key Moments

One practical way to think about this is that students must be re recruited at key points in their journey. Joining the school is only the first decision. The decision to continue is made repeatedly, often at predictable stages.

At each transition, schools have an opportunity to present a renewed value proposition. This does not mean abandoning core principles. It means clarifying how the program meets the needs of students at their current stage of development.

Retention is rarely lost suddenly. More often, it erodes when expectations shift and schools fail to respond visibly and proactively. Schools that anticipate these danger zones and prepare families in advance are better positioned to guide students through them.



Belonging and Emotional Safety Matter More Over Time

As students grow older, relational factors become increasingly important. All four interviews, in different ways, highlight the role of emotional safety, trust, and being “known.”

This shows up as:

- stable peer groups that grow together
- teachers and staff who notice small details
- adults who speak with students individually, not only in class
- non-judgmental support during difficult personal periods

For older students in particular, schools often shift from a teacher-centered role to something closer to mentorship. Several interviews describe staff acting as trusted adults, sometimes even as a safer listener than parents during adolescence.

Retention improves when students feel that the school is not just a place they attend, but a place where they belong.

Where the Schools Meaningfully Differ

While the underlying principles are shared, the interviews also reveal important differences in execution.

Some schools rely on **strict structure**: closed cohorts, limited entry points, fixed schedules, and non-negotiable rules. Others allow more flexibility but compensate with heavier communication and intervention. Neither approach is inherently superior, but each carries different operational costs.

There are also clear differences in emphasis. Some schools lean heavily toward academic outcomes and measurable results, particularly in the junior high years. Others prioritize immersion, bilingual identity, or holistic learning, downplaying tests. Retention remains strong in both cases **as long as expectations are clear**. Problems arise when schools drift into ambiguity where academic demands increase without explanation, or when experiential programs fail to demonstrate progress.

Event strategy is another divergence. Some schools are deliberately event-heavy, using shared experiences to bind families emotionally. Others intentionally minimize events to protect sustainability and focus energy inside the classroom. Again, both approaches work when they are consistent and intentional. Inconsistency, i.e: promising community but failing to deliver it—is what undermines trust.

Finally, scale matters. Smaller schools rely more on owner presence and personal relationships; larger schools depend on staff training, culture, and systems. Yet even the largest schools resist fully automating care. Emotional connection remains a human practice, not a checklist.

What “Care” Actually Means in High-Retention Schools

Every interview uses the word *care*, but not in a sentimental sense.

Care is expressed through structure, consistency, and follow-through. It means setting boundaries, having difficult conversations, intervening early, and staying engaged when it would be easier to disengage. It also means investing in staff so that care is not dependent on one individual.

Across all four schools, care is not softness. It is **reliability**.

Retention as a Byproduct, Not a Goal

Taken together, these interviews suggest a reframing: retention is not something to chase directly. It is the byproduct of intentional design.

When a school:

- defines its identity clearly

- aligns expectations early
- manages transitions deliberately
- makes progress visible
- treats parents as partners
- and creates emotional safety

staying becomes the simplest option.

In that sense, retention is not the outcome of clever tactics. It is the quiet signal that the deeper work (educational, relational, and organizational) is being done well.

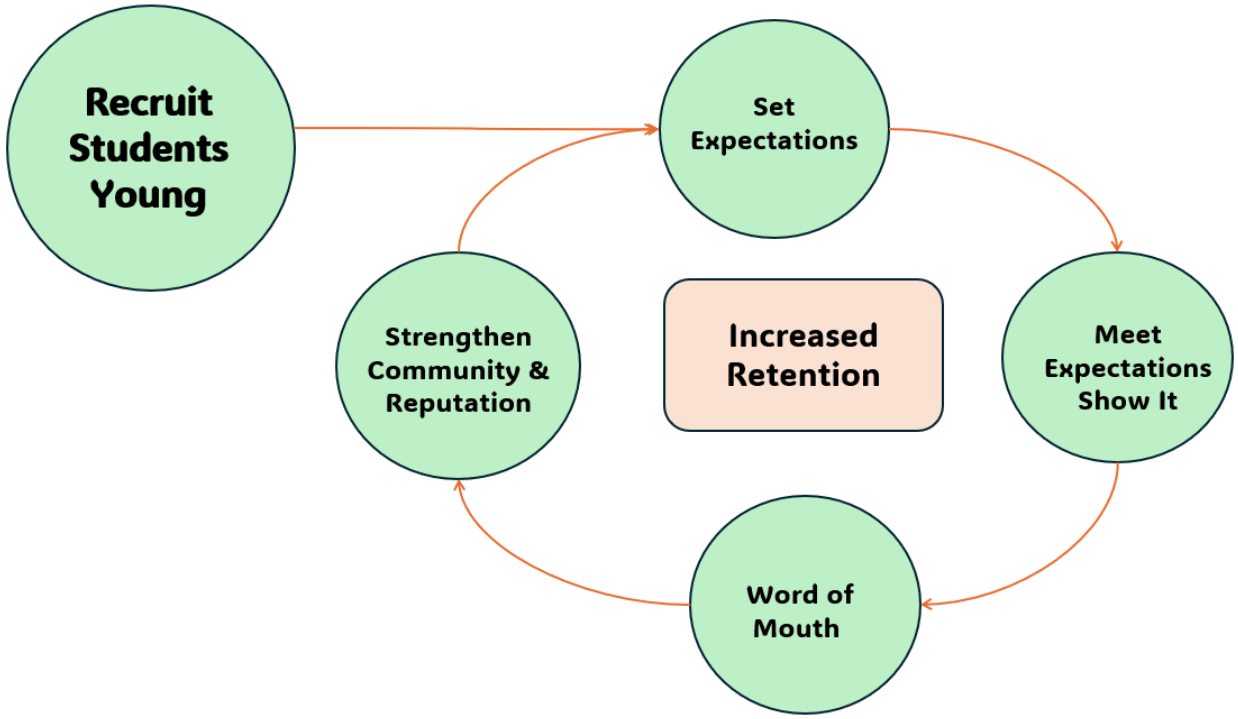
The Virtuous Cycle of Student Retention

Strong retention is not built in a single semester. It is built in small, steady decisions made over years. There are no quick fixes. The families who join your school this year will determine your retention figures five or ten years from now. What you choose to communicate to them, and what you consistently deliver, will shape whether their children grow up seeing English as a temporary activity or as a lasting part of who they are.

The virtuous cycle begins with clarity. When families understand from the beginning that learning English is a long term commitment, expectations are set differently. It becomes normal to continue through upper elementary, junior high, and beyond. This is especially powerful when students begin young. Children who stay with English through their formative years often do not experience it as a subject they attend once a week. It becomes part of their identity, part of how they see themselves and what they believe they are capable of.

As students grow, expectations must grow with them. Promises made early must be fulfilled, and new goals must be introduced before doubt begins to form. When families see steady progress, when they feel understood and supported at each stage, trust deepens. That trust turns into confidence, and confidence turns into commitment.

In time, that commitment extends beyond individual families. Students who stay and succeed become living proof of what is possible. Parents talk to other parents. Younger children look up to older students. A culture forms in which long term growth is expected, not exceptional. Reputation strengthens. Referrals increase. New families arrive already believing that staying is the norm.



This is the virtuous cycle of student retention. It is not built on pressure or persuasion, but on belief, consistency, and care. When schools honour their promises over time, students do not simply remain enrolled. They grow, they gain confidence, and they leave not with regret, but with the quiet knowledge that they were part of something that mattered.

Retention, at its best, is not about keeping students, but about building a school worthy of being stayed with.