

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Supporting students' learning

Resources and case studies for schools, teachers and parents

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



The research tells us that ...

Teachers and parents/carers are key sources of support for learning. Greater levels of support are associated with better student academic and wellbeing outcomes.

This resource accompanies the Learning Curve *Supporting students' learning – insights from students, parents and teachers*. Together, these publications explore how advocacy and support for learning are experienced at school and in the home. The current document provides some evidence-based practices and local examples of how to foster supportive learning environments. It is organised into two sections:

1. Practical **strategies** that schools, teachers and parents/carers can use to help create a supportive learning environment, based on the data and research from the Learning Curve. These are supported by examples of pastoral and academic programs used in NSW

government secondary schools that help to improve measures of advocacy at school¹.

2. Two in-depth **case studies** from one primary and one secondary school in NSW that demonstrate high levels of advocacy at school. These case studies detail some of the programs and initiatives to which these schools attribute their positive results.

Acknowledgements

The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) would like to thank the principals and school leaders who took part in this research for sharing their time and insights with the *Tell Them From Me* team.

1. These examples come from a series of in-depth interviews conducted with secondary school leaders during 2017.

Strategies to foster teachers' and parents' support for student learning

What schools can do to support students

- Encouraging regular and open communication between teachers and student helps to reinforce the message that there is always someone at school who can provide support and to whom a student can turn for advice.
- Make it clear to students whom they can approach, as well as when and where might be best to start a conversation. One strategy that has been used effectively in NSW schools is a flowchart illustrating 'Who can I go to for help on *this topic*' and 'When and where can I find them?' In this visual format, pathways to support are presented next to clear instructions on how to find them.
- Schools could consider professional training opportunities around coaching, mental health, and student wellbeing so that all staff have the skills and knowledge to respond appropriately to students who may need support. Staff with capabilities such as active listening and knowledge about when and where to refer students with different needs, can feel better placed to provide pastoral forms of support.

Some schools use teacher mentors for their senior students. An important aspect of these teacher mentoring programs is giving students the autonomy to nominate a preferred teacher, and the flexibility to have each mentor meeting focused on a different theme:

"Twice a term we have what we call a mentoring week. The students select a teacher mentor ... and then twice a term they will meet with the mentor at a specific allocated time that they have negotiated ... and they'll go through an area of focus with that particular teacher mentor. That's the formal structure. But the informal structure is that each Year 12 student actually has a teacher that they can speak to as a first point of contact. So that gives the students another point of contact at the school. The students selecting their mentors was the key element of engaging most of the students in the mentoring program."

Girraween High School

- Schools can provide parents/carers with knowledge and skills to help them support their child's learning and engagement. Strategies could involve:
 - Parent-focused workshops on how to support their children in primary, secondary and senior secondary learning contexts. Topics may include establishing homework routines, study skills, balancing extracurricular and academic activities, and supporting the move to increased student independence and autonomy.
 - Giving parents/carers the details of each term's course, which outline the topics and assessments to be covered. Providing timelines and highlighting when assessment tasks occur lets parents/carers know when there are pressure points in their child's schooling and when more support at home may be needed.
 - Developing clear school processes about how to communicate with families so that teachers are well equipped to engage with parents/carers on issues such as homework completion, lateness, or problematic behaviour.
 - Inviting parents/carers of students who have transitioned from Year 6 to 7, or graduated from Year 12, to speak at community/parent meetings and share their experiences about how to best support their children during these key transition periods.



School leaders in NSW recognise the important role of parent/carer support for learning, and use engagement events as a way to improve parental involvement. Several schools run parent-focused sessions, such as parent interest groups, consultation forums, and student conferences to inform parents/carers about the students' learning progress and how they can support their children through school:

"Parents can come and hear about a particular contemporary topic and how to support their kids. [These] have been around literacy, numeracy, anxiety, and a multitude of other things all aimed at educating parents to support them in their parenting. We try to bring them on as a partnership. It's us working with them and their kids in that essential partnership."

Plumpton High School

"We do work under that umbrella philosophy of 'it takes a village' and it's very important that parents are informed in a timely manner and are given sufficient information to be able to work with us to support their child and the child's learning."

Colyton High School



What teachers can do to support students

- Creating and sharing student profiles can help teachers acquire individual knowledge about each student quickly. Staff can record important student needs in a central location or system, and share this information so there is a corporate bank of knowledge. This means students do not have to repeatedly disclose their concerns or needs to each different staff member.
- Regular use of informal formative assessments, such as quick one-to-one feedback activities, can help to open the communication channels between teacher and students (Wiliam 2011).
- Encourage student voice and ask for feedback and suggestions. Choose a topic and have students write down what confuses or concerns them about it. By considering what they have to say, it shows students that their opinions and experiences are valued and important (Anderson & Graham 2016).
- It can be especially difficult for secondary teachers to get to know all their students. One strategy that can be used to foster teacher-student relations is for teachers to aim to speak with a few students in each lesson.

Schools can use Tell Them From Me data to identify which student groups report experiencing low levels of advocacy in school. This can help schools make decisions about how they can use classroom time more effectively to improve support:

"[The school uses] Learning Engagement Aspiration Positivity Success (LEAPS), a wellbeing pastoral program across the school in Years 7 to 12. Last year it was based around wellbeing topics. This year it's evolved because of student information as well as the data that we get from Tell Them From Me which told us some students perceived themselves as unmotivated or having anxiety."

Marrickville High School

"We try to have roll call where teachers continue with their groups so there's a little bit of pastoral care there, keeping you more aware when kids are having a hard time."

East Hills Boys High School

Eddie Woo on getting to know his students

“I have 24 students in my class and I’m going to struggle to have a really meaningful conversation with all 24 of them every single lesson ... so what I do, and it’s changed the way I know my students so much ... is that I’ll say every lesson I’m going to pick out three particular kids. No matter what I’m doing in the classroom, I’m going to make sure I have a decent conversation where I ask questions, where there’s real interaction with those three kids ... Doing something like this and making sure you have a regular, systematic way of getting to every single kid, knowing them well and having a deep knowledge of where they’re at and what they need to move forward, I’ve found has been enormously helpful for getting across the bulk of kids, many of whom need help but you wouldn’t know otherwise, because they want to fly under the radar. They don’t want to draw attention to themselves.”

To see the video, visit <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/effective-practices/component/k2/item/22-interview-with-eddie-woo>



What parents/carers and schools can do to support students at home

- Encourage family members to spend some time talking to their child about day-to-day events. Parent/carer or family engagement does not have to be directly related to schooling (e.g. supervising or helping with homework) but can be a show of interest in what is happening at school in general. Instead of asking ‘what did you learn at school today?’, an alternative question may be ‘did you do anything interesting at school today?’.
- Parents/carers and family members can look for opportunities to extend their child’s knowledge and learning during everyday interactions at home. Conversations can inspire curiosity and deeper thinking – encourage ‘why’ and ‘what if’ questions to facilitate analytical thinking or perspective taking (O’Reilly et al. 2017). Children can be helped to notice, explore and discuss concepts learned in school within situations at home (e.g. calculating the change from a grocery shop; Gervasoni 2017).
- Schools can use simple communication tools such as emails and text services to facilitate parental or family involvement. Messages from schools that invite parents/carers to take specific actions (e.g. ‘Encourage your child to study for Friday’s test’; Miller et al. 2016) support parental involvement by providing direct and actionable instruction.

References

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Supporting students' learning: Whalan Public School

Advocacy at school refers to the active consideration and support of students' academic and wellbeing needs. This case study describes how Whalan Public School provides high levels of advocacy for its students. In particular, it looks at how a school environment focused on providing consistency and familiarity, and a commitment to improving parent and community engagement, have contributed to the creation of a highly supportive school environment.

Background

Whalan Public School is a government primary school located in Mount Druitt, western Sydney. It has 370 students, with 21% Aboriginal students and 31% students from a Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE). The school's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value is considerably lower than the state average. Around 75% of students are in the bottom ICSEA quarter, and this has remained relatively consistent since 2013. The attendance rate for all students was 90% in 2016 (My School 2016). Whalan Public School has five staff members who live in the local community. Having staff who live within the area has really helped the school develop a better understanding of the needs of the community and build strong parent engagement.

Listening to their students is central to how Whalan Public School provides strong advocacy at school

Whalan Public School attributes its success to committed and caring staff who are attentive, encouraging, and who value what they do because they know it's going to make a difference.

According to the deputy principal, Whalan's staff focus on nurturing their students' interests and wellbeing which, in turn, feeds engagement and perseverance in the classroom. The school uses its free extra-curricular activities and clubs program as a way of creating a safe space for its students. The clubs change every semester and the activities offered are decided by asking the students what activities they are interested in. Over the years these activities have ranged broadly, from Zumba dance to photography club. These clubs also offer another option to children who may find playground time difficult or overwhelming. The school also uses wellbeing strategies, such as happy-grams (positive notes taken home to parents/carers) and the worry box

(students write down their anxieties and put them in a safe space), which all go towards encouraging and supporting the students to feel heard, valued and safe.

Whole-school approaches based on consistency and familiarity create a supportive learning environment

Whalan Public School has structures in place to ensure it provides a learning environment that is consistent for its students from year to year, and between teachers and classrooms. This consistent approach helps to alleviate student anxiety by providing familiar classrooms and learning frameworks year on year. The school has a strong induction program for new teachers, which involves a one-on-one mentor in the first year, and then utilises stage team leaders to build capacity. Teaching practices are implemented school-wide; for example, the START (Students and Teachers Actively Reading Text) comprehension strategy is used from Kindergarten all the way through to Year 6, with the same structure and delivery.

In 2008, the Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) initiative was introduced at Whalan Public School and was fully embedded by 2010. Using the PBL framework, the school established expected standards of behaviour



The Whalan 5

The *Whalan 5* is based on Lyn Sharratt's and Michael Fullan's 'The Power of Five Questions'. The aim of these questions is to check for mindful learning. Sharratt and Fullan found that students who can accurately describe their learning, and how to improve, are more likely to show greater progress in their achievement. The *Whalan 5* was implemented at Whalan Public School to focus its teachers and students on learning intentions, success criteria, goal-setting and feedback.

The *Whalan 5* version:

1. What are you learning today?
2. Why are you learning this?
3. How will you know you've learnt it?
4. How can you improve?
5. How are you an expert learner?



that are well documented and well known across the school. This means that students know what is expected of them and the staff are able to deliver consistent responses to student behaviour.

School leaders recognised that much of their classroom language in the past had been focused on behavioural reinforcement. Following the success of PBL, the school introduced the *Whalan 5* in 2014 to build on positive results from its PBL program and shift the focus from behaviour management to support for learning. At the end of lessons, students are asked five questions (the *Whalan 5*) to explicitly address whether students are actively learning in the classroom. This initiative was used to focus classroom time on students' learning experiences, through specific learning intentions, success criteria, goal-setting and feedback in a structured way. The implementation of PBL, and later the *Whalan 5*, have helped embed a consistent and supportive classroom environment for all students across all years.

Growing parent and community engagement is helping to shift the focus towards supporting student learning

Whalan Public School has worked hard to engage parents in their children's learning and with the school. Scheduled open classroom time every morning allows parents to speak to the teachers and look over their child's class work before the start of school. Staff encourage students to put their day's work on their desk and invite them to bring in their parent(s) the next morning to see it. According to the deputy principal, this has had a positive impact on both student and parent engagement.

In 2013, the school developed and introduced its 'Wisdom Stories' program. Each class in Kindergarten to Year 6 draws upon the traditions of their cultural and Aboriginal communities and presents a wisdom story that delivers a message or value that the school

promotes. Each wisdom story is represented by artwork that is displayed at the entrance of each classroom, and parents were invited to share their knowledge of the stories and the corresponding artwork. Whalan Public School sees this as a way of showing their students that everyone is working together, teachers and parents in partnership, to support them and their culture.

The school's community days also provide an opportunity to showcase the learning and teaching taking place at Whalan. More recently, these community days have included workshops on how parents can support their children with numeracy and literacy, and how to help their children develop other capabilities, for example, homework-related skills. These events are welcomed by an increasingly engaged parent community who are interested in how they can support their children in their learning. The deputy principal describes this as an indicator of the school's successful shift to a focus on learning in both the classroom and in the community.

Acknowledgements

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Supporting students' learning: Sir Joseph Banks High School

Advocacy at school refers to the active consideration and support of students' academic and wellbeing needs. This case study describes how Sir Joseph Banks High School provides high levels of advocacy for its students. In particular, it looks at how developing internal and external relationships, establishing proactive support systems, and using data to focus school priorities, have contributed to the creation of a highly supportive school environment.

Background

Sir Joseph Banks High School (SJBHS) is a comprehensive coeducational government secondary school located in Revesby, south-west Sydney. It has 591 students, with 90% students from a Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) and 2% Aboriginal students. The school's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value is lower than the state average. Around 60% of students are in the bottom ICSEA quarter, and this has remained relatively consistent since 2013. The attendance rate for all students was 88% in 2016 (My School 2016). SJBHS uses its equity funding to employ additional teachers and Student Learning and Support Officers (SLSOs) to ensure a targeted response to additional student needs in consultation with the local community and in alignment with the School Plan. The school community appreciates that this allows the school to be responsive to student needs through targeted employment and staffing flexibility.

Creating and connecting relationships is central to how Sir Joseph Banks High School provides strong advocacy at school

SJBHS attributes its success in school advocacy to its focus on relationships, both within and outside the school. One of its Strategic Directions is to create a school environment where the interconnecting relationships among its students, staff, parents and community are valued and nurtured. Over the last few years, the school's philosophy has shifted to 'collective efficacy' – a shared vision for learning and teaching, and purposeful, focused teacher collaboration. This shift has been facilitated by school leaders all having the opportunity to participate in Choice Theory Lead Management training² for their



professional development. The school has also taken steps to build stronger relationships with its parent community by increasing its social media presence and community publicity. Real-time social media updates and weekly news emails give parents direct and up-to-date information about their child's and the school's activities. This form of regular communication has encouraged parents to take up these channels to respond to, and start conversations with, the school.

SJBHS recognises that it has not been one of the area's preferred secondary schools in the past. Responding to this, the school executive has focused on building relationships with partner and feeder primary schools through the implementation of its Primary Partners program. This program invites local primary schools to SJBHS to participate in learning events. Principals from the primary schools select programs for their students in Year 3 onwards from an extensive range of activities led by SJBHS teachers and using the school's facilities.

² Choice theory is based on a positive psychological approach, which acknowledges that needs motivate behaviour. From this perspective, people's behaviours are usually an attempt to meet their needs and therefore are purposeful and chosen. Conditions for work and learning need to be clear and attainable to help align personal needs with that of the organisation. Lead management is an application of choice theory which focuses on the processes of fostering positive relationships and giving leadership roles to people to develop their own vision. The practices of choice theory and lead management within the school context have been widely used, with a core focus on fostering quality relationships and high quality work that is intrinsically motivated in both staff and students (Glasser, W 1998, *The Quality School* [Revised Edition], HarperCollins).

The Primary Partners program has been crucial in communicating the opportunities that are available to students at SJBHS, and the school has seen an increase in Year 7 enrolments for the last two years.

SJBHS also has strong links with local businesses and universities. For example, the school's Learning Centre brings in tutors from the University of Technology Sydney to provide mentoring support for Year 12 students. Along with providing academic support, the school sees the university students as role models that help to foster their own students' aspirations to go to university. This approach appears to be contributing to an increased proportion of SJBHS students going on to university. In 2017, all of the 47% of Year 12 students who aspired to attend university received a first-round offer to a university of their choice. This result has been achieved three years running since the Learning Centre was established in 2015.

Coordinated and proactive systems support the academic and wellbeing needs of every student

SJBHS is strongly committed to personalised learning and providing a supportive environment for all its students. The school aims to have appropriate structures in place when students join SJBHS so that every student knows how and where to access the right support. A strong partnership with their feeder primary schools allows SJBHS to form a relationship with their incoming students so that academic and wellbeing needs are known and planned for, which has helped to make students feel supported as soon as they arrive at the school. The Learning and Support Team coordinates and develops support plans for students experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, difficulties at school so that they can receive quick and appropriate attention. All staff and teachers within the school, including temporary or casual teachers, are able to access and implement support plans through online student profiles. The principal says that these systems also provide important support for teachers as there are structures and mechanisms in place to manage student needs and issues effectively, empowering teachers to 'act, not react'.

For 2018, the school introduced a Transition Team to focus on personalised pathways as students move through and beyond school. The team will work with four feeder primary schools to build a Community of Schools, which plans to support students as they move from Year 6 to Year 7. Careers education in Years 9 and 10 will target students' changing aspirations through online surveys and aligning these aspirations with careers education. Year 11 students have an Individualised Learning Plan (ILP) to support post school options. This is regularly revisited to ensure that student goals are in alignment with their chosen pathway. Another goal of the team is to identify and provide interested students with opportunities for pathways into apprenticeships or vocational education and training (VET). This ensures that 'every student leaves with one foot into their future'



in a career option, employment or further education in a tertiary institution. The creation of the Transition Team helps to show every student that their needs will be catered for at SJBHS. The principal highlight the usefulness of their equity funding to provide these dynamic roles; in this instance, through providing the funds to backfill teaching hours and free up the time for their staff to develop strong programs for the school.

Using data to focus priorities and shift community perceptions of the school

SJBHS uses data to facilitate change within the school and for its students. The current principal is a strong advocate of the use of data and evidence to identify areas that warrant priority attention. For example, the Year 9 targeted *Power Up* literacy strategy was implemented in 2017 following rigorous analysis of student achievement data and as a targeted response to the NSW Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2017-2020. Using data and learning benchmarks, students are given improvement goals and provided with explicit instruction and skill-building activities that help to move them along the literacy continuum and meet their individual goals. Teachers in small groups of three meet with an Instructional Leader once a fortnight to undertake professional learning in literacy as well as to track, map and reflect on their students' data.

School leaders are also seeing that positive data can be used to engage the community and shift previous perceptions of SJBHS. School and student successes are celebrated by sharing results and outcomes with staff, parents and the community. The school is experiencing an improvement in student numbers as sharing information and positive results about the school have increased its profile and status within the local community as the school of choice.

Acknowledgements

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Have you seen these resources?

What works best: Evidence-based practices to help improve NSW student performance

The 'What works best' publication brings together seven themes from the growing bank of evidence for what works to improve student educational outcomes.

<https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/what-works-best-evidence-based-practices-to-help-improve-nsw-student-performance>

Anti-bullying interventions in schools – what works?

CESE has published a literature review summarising the evidence on the effectiveness of school-based anti-bullying interventions.

<https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/anti-bullying-interventions-in-schools-what-works>

The role of student engagement in the transition from primary to secondary school

This Learning Curve uses data from the NSW *Tell Them From Me* student surveys to look at the relationship between students' sense of belonging, their relationships with peers and teachers, and the support they receive at school and home over the primary to secondary school transition.

<https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/the-role-of-student-engagement-in-the-transition-from-primary-to-secondary-school>

360° Reflection tool

The 360° Reflection Tool is an online survey which provides principals, school leaders and other school-based staff the opportunity to reflect on, better understand and gather feedback on customer relationships and communication with parents, students and the wider community.

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/inside-the-department/communication-and-engagement/services-and-support/planning-your-communication/360-reflection-tool>



A network diagram consisting of numerous light blue circular nodes of varying sizes connected by thin white lines, set against a dark teal background. The nodes are scattered across the page, with a higher density in the lower right quadrant.

Author: CESE

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
GPO Box 33, Sydney NSW 2001, Australia

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☎ 02 7814 1399

Y Yammer

✉ info@cese.nsw.gov.au

