NSW GOVERNMENT

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Supporting students' sense of belonging
Every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
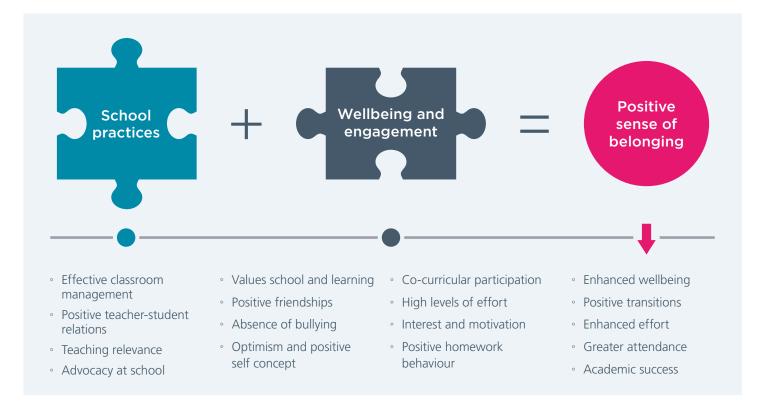
Introduction

When students feel a sense of belonging at school, they have positive relationships, value learning and engage with their school environment. This synthesis of research explains why students' sense of belonging is important and provides practical suggestions for schools to support and care for their students.

Key findings

- Students who experience a positive sense of belonging at school also have improved overall wellbeing, mental health and long-term academic success.

- Sense of belonging is linked to both student engagement and wellbeing and teaching practices.

- Students who experience a positive sense of belonging are more likely to experience positive friendships, an absence of bullying at school and co-curricular participation at school. They also tend to value learning, show high levels of effort, interest and motivation, as well as positive homework behaviour.

- Effective classroom management, teaching relevant content, leading by example in the classroom, positive teacher-student relationships and advocacy (or support) at school can all enhance students' sense of belonging.

- A positive sense of belonging is important throughout a child's schooling, particularly during periods of transition.

Student sense of belonging in NSW public schools

Students report on the level of belonging at school that they experience in the student survey offered to NSW public schools – Tell Them From Me (TTFM). TTFM reports on student, parent and teacher perspectives of their school and provides data on students' wellbeing and engagement, as well as the teaching practices they encounter in the classroom. This paper presents findings on how to support students' sense of belonging, drawn from longitudinal modelling of TTFM data, NSW case studies and literature reviews conducted by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). Accompanying papers provide findings on how to support high academic expectations[1] and advocacy at school[2] and to support school improvement with TTFM[3].

School practices	Wellbeing and engagement	Positive sense of belonging
◦ Effective classroom management	◦ Values school and learning	◦ Co-curricular participation	◦ Enhanced wellbeing

- Effective classroom management
- Positive teacher-student relations
- Teaching relevance
- Advocacy at school

- Values school and learning
- Positive friendships
- Absence of bullying
- Optimism and positive self concept

- Co-curricular participation
- High levels of effort
- Interest and motivation
- Positive homework behaviour

- Enhanced wellbeing
- Positive transitions
- Enhanced effort
- Greater attendance
- Academic success

1   Supporting high expectations.
2   Supporting advocacy at school.
3   Supporting school improvement.

What is sense of belonging?

Sense of belonging measures a student's perception of being accepted, valued and included in their school setting by their peers and others in the school. A student's sense of belonging is influenced by a complex set of relationships with peers, teachers, families and the broader community.

Why is a positive sense of belonging important?

A strong sense of belonging is associated with positive outcomes for students' academic achievement and wellbeing. Research suggests that students with a positive sense of belonging are more likely to stay in school longer, have less absenteeism and higher academic outcomes. Students who have a high sense of belonging in school generally put in more effort and are more motivated at school. Schools offer a unique environment for students to develop their sense of belonging. A sense of belonging is particularly important during periods of transition, including primary to secondary school[4] and post-school transitions. Students who experience a caring and nurturing school environment, where they feel they belong, have a strong base to achieve their academic potential. A school's social and organisational culture can provide a caring framework for students to mature into adults who feel they belong in the wider community beyond school.

How do we measure sense of belonging?

In NSW, schools are able to examine the extent to which their students experience a positive sense of belonging at school through data collected in the Tell Them From Me student survey. This survey asks students whether they feel included and accepted at school and if they make friends easily. Sense of belonging is not a simple construct; many elements work together to ensure a student feels like they belong in their school environment.

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

What is happening in NSW?

Findings from the Tell Them From Me student survey suggest that students experience different levels of belonging at different stages of their schooling[5]. Primary school students have a very strong sense of belonging at school. Sense of belonging drops in the middle years of high school with a slight increase in the senior years.
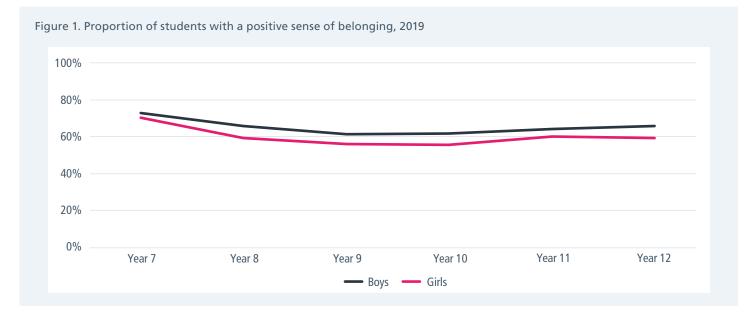
Gender has an impact on sense of belonging (Figure 1). Female students' sense of belonging at school is lower throughout high school. Sense of belonging for girls has a significantly sharper drop from Years 7-9 than boys. Positive relationships have a significant impact on students' overall sense of belonging.

> 'I know my culture is really supported and accepted here… it helps me feel proud of who I am.'
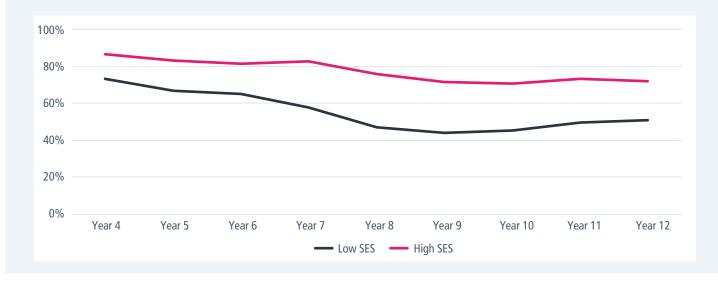>
> Year 9 Aboriginal student, Engadine High School

Socioeconomic status (SES) also makes a difference (Figure 2). Students from low-SES backgrounds have a lower sense of belonging compared to students from high-SES backgrounds. The gap between low- and high-SES students increases significantly when students transition to high school and continues to increase through to Year 9. Australian and NSW results on international assessments of students, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)[6], also highlight this gap between the most and least socio-economically advantaged students in our schools. Furthermore, PISA results show that there has been a slow decline in sense of belonging at school among students, both in Australia and overseas. This decline is most pronounced for students from the lowest SES background.

Developing a student's positive sense of belonging at high school begins while they are in primary school and requires ongoing attention as relationships and attitudes continue to develop and evolve[7]. A student with a positive sense of belonging in Year 6 is three times more likely to feel they belong in Year 7 after the transition to high school, compared to a student who does not feel a strong sense of belonging in Year 6.

Figure 1. Proportion of students with a positive sense of belonging, 2019

Figure 2. Proportion of students with a positive sense of belonging by student level SES, 2019

5 Tell Them From Me: Gender and engagement.
6 OECD (2019), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Students' Lives*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/acd78851-en.
7 The role of student engagement in the transition from primary to secondary school.

Improving students' sense of belonging

What does the evidence say?[8]

CESE has conducted longitudinal modelling using the TTFM data for both primary and secondary students. The models identified which classroom practices, engagement and wellbeing factors drive a positive sense of belonging for students in a primary or secondary school setting. A student's prior sense of belonging is the single largest indicator of their current sense of belonging, over the transition from Year 6 to Year 7. Schools can influence students' sense of belonging by providing a positive learning climate, and teachers can engage in frequent and meaningful conversations with students to know their students and be an advocate when required. Outside of the classroom, positive friendships, the absence of bullying, being optimistic and having a positive self-concept are all factors that can affect an individual's sense of belonging.

Several practices can improve levels of students' sense of belonging.

Foster positive relationships

Positive relationships are a protective factor for students. Relationships with peers and teachers help a student to feel accepted and cared for in the school community. Students are more likely to perceive that they have positive relationships with their teachers when teachers are caring, fair and help students work out personal issues. Students with positive friendships are more likely to be involved in extra-curricular activities and have a stronger network of friends.

Minimise bullying

Bullying has long-term detrimental effects on students' sense of wellbeing, mental health and academic outcomes. There is a large and growing body of evidence[9] that suggests school-based interventions can be successful in reducing bullying behaviours. Characteristics of effective anti-bullying programs include:

- a systematic and holistic, school-wide approach and implementation

- educational content that supports students to develop social and emotional competencies, and learn appropriate ways to respond

- professional development for teachers and other school staff on how best to maintain a positive school climate.

Lead by example in the classroom

Teachers play an important role in nurturing students' sense of belonging. Teaching practices used in the classroom can model appropriate behaviour and promote a positive sense of belonging for students. This requires teachers to prioritise high-quality teacher-student relationships to create supportive and caring learning environments based on principles of respect and fairness. A positive learning climate is a powerful tool for teachers to promote belonging for all students.

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8   Findings are drawn from literature reviews in publications highlighted in the 'Find out more' section as well as from unpublished longitudinal modelling conducted in partnership with University of Queensland – Institute for Social Science Research.
9   Anti-bullying interventions in schools.

How are schools effectively supporting students' sense of belonging?

Encouraging positive behaviour

Establishing clear expectations for behaviour in the playground and classroom helps students to understand appropriate behaviour in different situations, within and beyond school. **Blue Haven Public School**[10] explicitly teaches students clear and consistent expectations of acceptable behaviour in the playground and classroom. Teachers model acceptable behaviour across all school environments. They also participate in structured activities during break times to assist students who may have trouble in displaying appropriate behaviour, which helps students to build positive friendships. Participation in activities outside the classroom allows teachers to demonstrate how to resolve issues appropriately. These activities and structures ensure that students have a clear understanding of expectations and consequences across the school. At **Whalan Public School**[11], a consistent and supportive classroom environment for all students was developed through the successful introduction of Positive Behaviour for Learning[12]. The school has shifted the focus from behaviour management to support for learning.

Smooth transitions from primary to secondary school

Providing students with an introduction to the structure of high school in a familiar setting can help support students as they transition to high school. The middle school approach used at **Homebush West Public School**[13] ensures students are familiar with the structures of high school, teaching students to be responsible for their own learning and encouraging them to take on more responsibility and leadership roles. The model uses a co-teaching approach in Years 5 and 6 with all students physically moving around the school with their belongings as they will in high school. Students receive a taste of what high school is like and learn to build relationships with different teachers and peer groups. This approach can help facilitate strong relationships with teachers and peers, leading to improved relationships and a positive sense of belonging.

A whole-school approach to wellbeing

Embedding a culture of collaboration is often the starting point for improving student wellbeing. **Cecil Hills High School**[14] carefully plans programs and initiatives to foster student wellbeing. Strong leadership, dedicated staff and the commitment of the wider school community help to ensure that these efforts are successful in supporting students at the school. Embedding wellbeing in a whole-school approach ensures that it is not considered an additional component of a student's education, but essential to developing the whole student.

The school leaders at **South Wagga Public School**[15] believe student wellbeing is a pre-requisite for learning and an essential part of school culture. The school provides students with many opportunities to build their social, emotional and academic skills. Students participate in cross-stage buddy groups to develop a sense of belonging, and promote responsibility and wellbeing. Buddy groups facilitate the development of friendships between like-minded students, and the collaboration between different groups within the school provides students with a basis for stronger friendships.

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10 Case studies: Blue Haven Public School.
11 Supporting students' learning.
12 Positive Behaviour for Learning is an evidence-based whole school approach to student wellbeing and behaviour. See also pbl.schools.nsw.gov.au, www.det.nsw.edu.au/wellbeing/succeed/positive-behaviour-learning.
13 Case studies: Homebush West Public School.
14 Case studies: Cecil Hills High School.
15 Case studies: South Wagga Public School.

Find out more

For more information on what you can do to support students' sense of belonging, refer to CESE's publications:

Anti-bullying interventions in schools – What works?

This literature review outlines which bullying interventions work in a school setting.

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

Case studies

These case studies describe strategies used in NSW public schools to promote positive outcomes for students, including a positive sense of belonging at school.

- Blue Haven Public School www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/blue-haven-public-school-case-study
- Homebush West Public School www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/homebush-west-case-study
- Cecil Hills High School www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/known-valued-cared-for
- Penrith Valley School www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/known-valued-cared-for
- Rosehill Public School www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/known-valued-cared-for
- South Wagga Public School www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/known-valued-cared-for
- Trangie Central School www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/known-valued-cared-for

Every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools – an environmental scan

This publication outlines the framework for the department's strategic goal and provide data to describe how NSW public schools are currently performing against wellbeing indicators.

www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/known-valued-cared-for#env

Supporting students' learning: Insights from students, parents and teachers

This publication highlights the role that advocacy, both within and outside school, plays in promoting positive outcomes for students.

www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/supporting-students-learning

Tell Them From Me: Gender and Engagement

This publication explores the gender gap in NSW schools and how boys have a stronger sense of belonging than girls.

www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/tell-them-from-me-gender-and-engagement

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

This publication shows the impact that high levels of engagement at school can have on facilitating a successful transition from primary to high school.

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

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

This publication brings together seven themes, including high academic expectations, for what works to improve student educational outcomes.

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

Additional references

Positive Behaviour for Learning - education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/whole-school-approach/positive-behaviour-for-learning-pbl

OECD (2019), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Students' Lives*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, doi.org/10.1787/acd78851-en

PISA Australia in Focus: Number 1 – Sense of belonging at school - research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=ozpisa

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