

Transition to school at Coonamble Public School

Case study

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



Under the School Success Model, the NSW Department of Education is committed to ensuring that every student, teacher, leader and school improves every year. This case study forms part of a series to support the NSW Department of Education's strategic goal of 'All children make a strong start in life and learning and make a successful transition to school'. A successful transition to school is about laying strong foundations for year-on-year improvement by ensuring that our students are engaged and ready for challenge. The case studies refer to and draw on the department's new Strong and successful start to school transition guidelines.

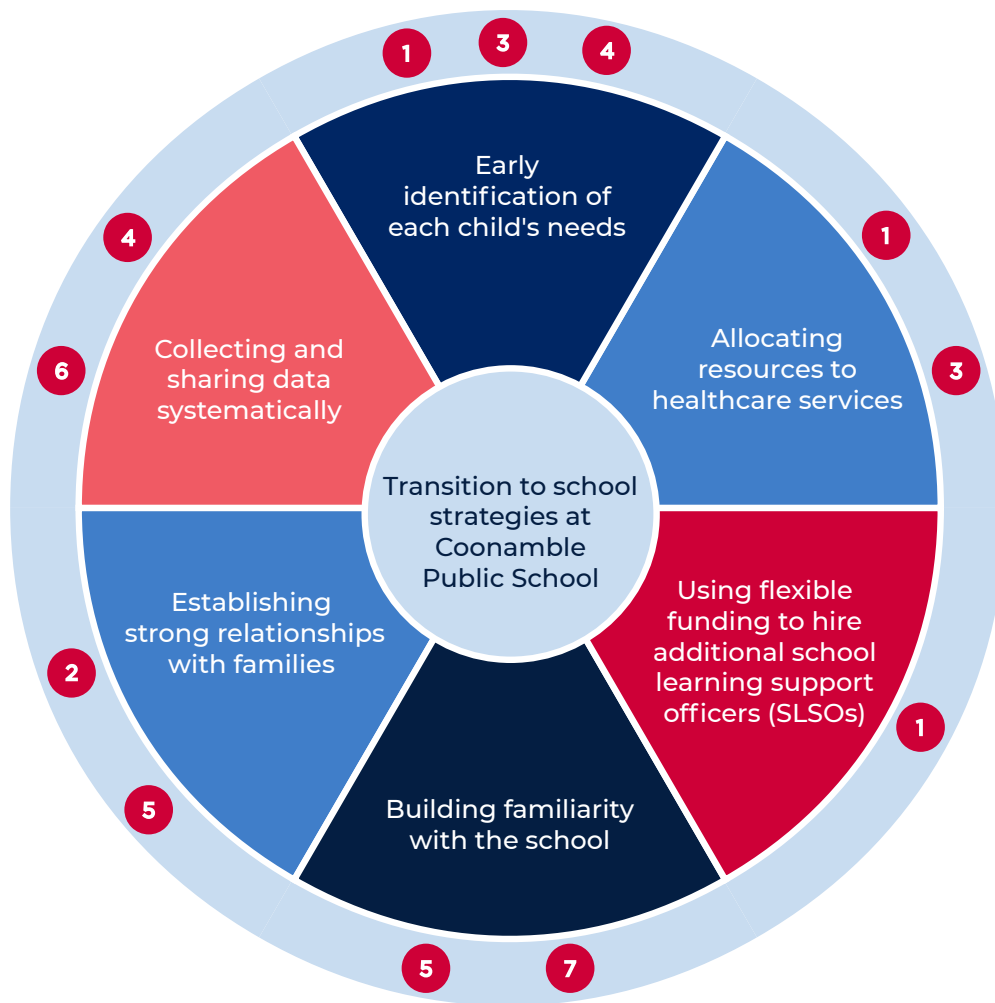
For more information about how the NSW Department of Education is supporting a strong and successful transition to school, visit the NSW Department of Education [Early Learning](#) and [Early Childhood Education](#) web pages. For an overview of the key findings from literature on the transition to school, see CESE's [Transition to school literature review](#).

Note. Fieldwork for the case studies was undertaken after the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak, but before the 2021 Delta outbreak.



What works to support a strong and successful transition to school at Coonamble Public School

The six strategies in the diagram below outline some of the ways Coonamble Public School supports a strong and successful transition to school. The strategies overlap and connect with each other, and there is strong alignment between these strategies, the School Excellence Framework and the NSW Department of Education's Strong and successful start to school transition guidelines.



Principles and practices of the Transition to school guidelines:

- 1 High expectations and equity
- 2 Collaboration and partnerships
- 3 Wellbeing and secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
- 4 Use of data to inform practice and ongoing learning and reflective practice
- 5 Continuity of learning
- 6 Assessment
- 7 Wellbeing and respect for diversity
- 8 Explicit teaching

School context

Coonamble Public School is a preschool to Year 6 school located in the north-west of NSW about 170 kilometres from Dubbo, with around 200 students. It is a Connected Communities school¹ with approximately 90% of students identifying as Aboriginal. The school has established strong partnerships with external services and agencies to ensure that all students are healthy and ready to learn. Coonamble Public School has a FOEI² of 201, which indicates a very high level of need and lower-socio economic status. The school receives considerable equity funding³ which it uses to address the additional learning needs of Aboriginal students and reduce the impact of disadvantage on student outcomes. It is an Early Action for Success⁴ school with a fulltime instructional leader appointed to improve literacy and numeracy achievement in the early years. In 2018, Coonamble Public School was externally validated as Excelling in the 'Transitions and continuity of learning' theme of the School Excellence Framework and the school reported that they continued to self-assess as Excelling in this theme in 2019 and 2020. In a comparison of government schools with Value Added data for Years 3-5, Coonamble Public School students achieved above average growth in 2020.



Transition to school at Coonamble Public School: an overview

Coonamble Public School has a department preschool on site which is attended by 90-95% of the school's students in the year before they start Kindergarten⁵. The school has two preschool classes which alternate between a three day and a two day attendance program, with both groups attending five days each fortnight. Coonamble Public School's transition program begins in the preschool and involves formal orientation visits and parent information sessions, as well as many informal opportunities for children and their families to become familiar with the primary school well before the start of Kindergarten. Typically, around two children start Kindergarten each year without attending Coonamble Public School Preschool. These children have either attended another early childhood education (ECE) service or have not attended any service prior to starting school.

Supporting a strong and successful transition is a priority at Coonamble Public School. As a result, the school invests significant time and resources into their transition practices, and school leaders ensure these resources are used strategically and flexibly to maximise their impact. A wide variety of stakeholders, including teaching and support staff, allied health staff and parents, are involved in the school's transition practices. This ensures that each child's needs are identified early, the learning environment is ready for all incoming children and every child receives the social, emotional and academic support they need to make a strong and successful transition to school.

- 1 The Connected Communities Strategy is a NSW whole of government, long-term commitment to working in partnership with school communities to create the generational change needed for students to achieve consistently better outcomes at school. The strategy currently operates in 16 schools, mostly in rural and remote communities.
- 2 Family Occupation and Education Index – a school-level index of educational disadvantage with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 50. Higher values indicate greater levels of need.
- 3 Equity funding is provided to schools to address the additional learning needs of students and reduce the impact of disadvantage on student outcomes.
- 4 Early Action for Success is a NSW government initiative that aims to improve students' literacy and numeracy skills through a targeted approach in the early years of schooling.
- 5 The NSW Department of Education currently operates 101 preschools across NSW.

Coonamble Public School: transition to school strategies

Early identification of each child's needs

Links to Transition to school guidelines:

- 1 High expectations and equity
- 3 Wellbeing and secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
- 4 Use of data to inform practice and ongoing learning and reflective practice

Coonamble Public School is committed to identifying the needs of each child before they start Kindergarten to enable differentiated planning and instruction. One of the ways they do this is by completing speech and occupational therapy screening assessments as part of their preschool program. The school uses these assessments to collect baseline data and identify children who may require additional support to achieve learning, health, developmental, or social-emotional outcomes. The school draws on the expertise of relevant allied health professionals and believes the assessments play an important role in providing a strong foundation from which teachers can plan effectively to support the specific needs of each child. This includes developing personalised learning plans and setting up wraparound services.

“A good transition also allows the students and parents and the teaching staff that may be interacting with these students the next year to start to build some relationships, as well to get a real gauge of what the kids might be needing and where they're sitting developmentally. Just so that everyone feels comfortable leading in to the start of Kindergarten.”

Jodi Prentice, K-2 Assistant Principal

The staff at Coonamble Public School analyse the baseline data from these early speech and occupational therapy assessments to identify student strengths and areas for improvement, and use the data to make teaching decisions. For example, the school adjusted their Kindergarten program by allocating additional time to oral language skills as it was identified as an area of student need. Coonamble Public School also uses the Best Start Kindergarten Assessment⁶ to collect information about each child's literacy and numeracy skills on entry to Kindergarten. Each child's progress in areas such as vocabulary and phonological awareness is then tracked periodically throughout Kindergarten.



6 Best Start Kindergarten is a one-on-one student assessment held in the first few weeks of Kindergarten to gain an understanding of each child's literacy and numeracy knowledge.

Allocating resources to healthcare services

Links to Transition to school guidelines:

- 1 High expectations and equity
- 3 Wellbeing and secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships

Coonamble Public School's leaders and teachers see investing in health support as playing a key foundational role in helping children flourish in their education journey. For this reason, the school works closely with the Aboriginal Medical Service who fund a nurse to work in the school two mornings each week. The school also has a designated therapy room for health professionals to deliver targeted support services and the school uses its equity funding to employ an allied health professional four days a week.

“The kids are heavily supported in that first year of school. The therapy aide has made a real difference in speech and OT [occupational therapy]. It's great to have that dedicated staff member.”

Jodi Prentice, K-2 Assistant Principal

The allied health professional supports the implementation of screening assessments and also delivers on-going face-to-face speech and occupational therapy sessions in the preschool with identified children. The allied health professional also oversees the team of staff who assist in providing therapy services across the whole school, including to identified Kindergarten children. The therapy team deliver one-on-one programs to identified Kindergarten children every day from 1pm and they support teachers directly in the classroom every morning. This ensures that all children receive the individualised support they need to make a successful transition to school. Coonamble Public School also participates in NSW Health's 'First 2,000 Days' program⁷.

Using flexible funding to hire additional school learning support officers (SLSOs)

Links to Transition to school guidelines:

- 1 High expectations and equity

Coonamble Public School uses flexible funding to hire additional SLSOs in their preschool and Kindergarten classes. The school funds these additional positions to ensure that every child is given the best opportunity to make a strong and successful transition to school. The additional SLSOs work with classroom teachers, school leaders and external agencies to improve the health, learning and wellbeing outcomes of children at Coonamble Public School.

“We reallocate staff, depending on need. We already fund a full-time SLSO to each Kindergarten classroom, plus we have a therapy SLSO completely dedicated to Kindergarten, who, in the literacy session, works completely in the classrooms in the morning.”

Anthea Robinson – Instructional Leader

SLSOs work with children in both small groups and individually, and they receive guidance from classroom teachers about the type of support each child needs. The day-to-day priorities of SLSOs are driven entirely by the needs of the student cohort. Teachers and school leaders believe that investing in additional SLSOs is a worthwhile practice, with children receiving more targeted, individualised support, which sets them up for further learning and a successful primary school experience.

⁷ This program focuses on maximising the support children receive in their first 2,000 days to ensure that they have the best possible start in life. health.nsw.gov.au/kidsfamilies/programs/Pages/first-2000-days.aspx

Building familiarity with the school

Links to Transition to school guidelines:

- 5 Continuity of learning
- 7 Wellbeing and respect for diversity

Coonamble Public School's transition program supports continuity of learning by ensuring children are familiar with their new school environment and teachers well before their first day of Kindergarten. In addition to the school's formal orientation visits, a number of deliberate strategies are planned that take advantage of the preschool's location on the grounds of Coonamble Public School. Kindergarten teachers carry out playground duties in the preschool throughout the year and preschool children have recess in the primary school in Term 4. Preschool children also visit the primary school regularly throughout the year, providing a familiarity with the classrooms, the library, how to order their lunch and the location of the toilets.

“The identified Kindergarten teacher will go down and do either a lunch duty or a recess duty in the preschool so that the preschool children are quite familiar with that person before they come to school.”

Annette Thomson, Executive Principal

“... it wasn't a scary big place that she was coming over to, through the year she was coming over here regularly and getting to see what it was all about over here [at the school].”

Parent

The importance of students connecting to their culture is recognised at Coonamble Public School and every effort is made to celebrate Aboriginal culture wherever possible. This begins in the preschool so that children are familiar with some of the ways the school community promotes pride in and respect for Aboriginal culture before they start Kindergarten. Preschool children participate in language and culture lessons regularly, take part in whole-school celebrations such as NAIDOC Week, and an Acknowledgement of Country each morning that they developed themselves. This lays a strong foundation for future learning about and celebration of the Aboriginal culture in the community. Coonamble Public School has built strong relationships with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and School Reference Group, and both groups provide advice and guidance for the school on educational initiatives that are culturally appropriate and respectful.





Establishing strong relationships with families

Links to Transition to school guidelines:

- 2 Collaboration and partnerships
- 5 Continuity of learning

Coonamble Public School recognises that the experiences of families during the transition to school is likely to impact the way they engage with their child's learning throughout their whole time at school. For this reason the school works diligently to connect with and build strong relationships with families starting when children are in preschool. Some of the ways they do this include: inviting all preschool children and their families to whole-school events including the annual Book Fair and NAIDOC Week celebrations; using social media to communicate key messages and explain what is happening at school; and employing a Senior Leader Community Engagement (SLICE) as part of the Connected Communities Strategy. This is a local Aboriginal person who coordinates initiatives and events to facilitate the achievement of the key deliverables of the Connected Communities Strategy. Part of their role is to connect with, and support, families at school and complete home visits. This supports strong partnerships and includes visiting the families of children who will start Kindergarten the following year but do not attend Coonamble Public School Preschool.

“A successful transition includes the families. It's not just about the children. It's about the families as well.”

Carolyn Jones, Preschool Assistant Principal

Coonamble Public School also builds strong relationships with families by making time to touch base with them regularly using their preferred communication method. Staff constantly liaise with families to ensure that their child's needs are being met and to discuss the expectations the school has for their child. Conversations with many families at the beginning of Kindergarten focus on the importance of regular school attendance. Staff discuss the school's clear and consistent attendance expectations with families and work towards improving attendance by applying a whole-school approach. For example, every class has attendance displays, individualised learning plans are put in place when required, and direct contact is made with families every day their child is absent from school. Aboriginal Student Liaison Officers (ASLOs) and Home School Liaison Officers (HSLOs) also support attendance by working directly with students and their families to support individual needs.

The school has also developed a reporting process that they believe promotes strong, collaborative partnerships with families. Rather than preparing traditional report cards, teachers produce an 'abridged' version that they elaborate on in a discussion with each family. Coonamble Public School's commitment to establishing strong relationships with families has resulted in parents and carers feeling confident and well supported during their child's transition to school.

Collecting and sharing data systematically

Links to Transition to school guidelines:

- 4 Use of data to inform practice and ongoing learning and reflective practice
- 6 Assessment

Collecting and sharing student data systematically plays an important role in supporting a strong and successful transition at Coonamble Public School. This is because it provides leaders, teachers and support staff across the preschool and primary school with access to an up-to-date and complete data set they can use to inform planning and improve their practice. Both preschool and primary school staff use the same whole-school data repository to collect and share information about their students, including information about each child's health and wellbeing, their social, emotional and physical skills, and the specialised support they need to be successful at school. All student assessments, including Best Start Kindergarten, are scanned and added to the repository, as well as information about each child's progress.

The repository is updated regularly and acts as a one-stop-shop for all P-6 student data. Preschool and primary school staff are allocated time to share and have conversations about student data during formal handover meetings in Term 4 each year, supporting a strong continuity of learning. Allocating time for these handover meetings, rather than asking teachers to complete them in their own time, enables detailed conversations between preschool and primary school staff that focus on each child's strengths and areas of need. Using student data to inform planning ensures that the school environment can be prepared to meet the needs of all children before they start Kindergarten.

“At the end of the year we have what we call a handover, from the current teacher to the next teacher. The preschool teacher provides the Kindergarten teacher with a handover for each child that's coming.”

Annette Thomson, Executive Principal



Where to from here

Coonamble Public School is committed to continuous improvement and has identified some of the next steps they will take to ensure that their students continue making a strong and successful transition to school. These include:

- customising the Transition to School Statement to the Coonamble Public School context so it can be used to inform teaching decisions
- using data to evaluate the effectiveness of the school's transition practices and modifying these practices to meet the needs of students across the full range of abilities
- continuing to work with the school community to further improve student attendance in the early years of school.

Acknowledgements

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Case study schools were selected using a combination of School Excellence Framework data, Value Added⁸ data and Kindergarten attendance data.



8 Value Added (VA) is a measure which indicates the progress students have made in their learning over a period of time.

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