

# Lambton High School and New Lambton South Public School

## Sense of belonging research series

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



# About this resource

In alignment with the NSW Plan for Public Education, this research series is a part of a suite of resources focusing on uplift in students' sense of belonging across NSW public schools. In 2023, CESE interviewed 10 schools of varied contexts. The aim was to identify practical strategies employed by schools across NSW to foster positive student belonging. These primary and secondary schools were chosen based on their sense of belonging scores in the Tell Them From Me survey. Each focus school in this research series illustrates different approaches that could be adopted to promote students' sense of belonging. Though these approaches have been tailored to the individual contexts of these schools, they offer insights that other schools can consider when addressing the specific wellbeing needs of their students.

## When and how to use

School leaders and teachers can read, consider, discuss and implement strategies highlighted in this research series and its accompanying resources as part of school-developed High Impact Professional Learning (HIPL). The appropriate time to use this resource may differ for each school, leader and teacher. The accompanying resources for this research series include:

- What Works Best to increase students' sense of belonging
- Making sense of belonging
- Fact sheet: How a positive sense of belonging helps students thrive
- Fact sheet: Measuring student wellbeing for school improvement.

### School leaders can:

- unpack the research series and accompanying resources as part of whole-school professional development and/or stage or grade team meetings
- access their school's data to lead discussions with staff about areas for improvement at a classroom and whole-school level.

### Teachers can:

- read the research series and accompanying resources and reflect on current practice
- consider which practices could be implemented in the classroom to lift student achievement, and discuss their thoughts with colleagues
- reflect on the impact of implementation.

**Contact:** Email feedback about this resource to [info@cese.nsw.gov.au](mailto:info@cese.nsw.gov.au).

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**Alignment to system priorities and/or needs:** Our Plan for NSW Public Education

**Alignment to School Excellence Framework:** Learning domain – wellbeing; Teaching domain – learning development; Leading domain – educational leadership; school planning, implementation and reporting

**Alignment with other existing frameworks:** What Works Best

**Reviewed by:** Aboriginal Outcomes and Partnerships; Learning, Teaching and Student Wellbeing; Public Schools; People, Culture and Capability; School Infrastructure NSW

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**To be reviewed:** CESE publications are prepared through a rigorous process. Resources are reviewed periodically as part of an ongoing evaluation plan.

## About Lambton High School and New Lambton South Public School

**Lambton High School** is a comprehensive government high school located on Awabakal country in Newcastle for students in Years 7–12. The school has a Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI)<sup>1</sup> of 55 in 2021, indicating that it serves a relatively advantaged population. As of 2023, Lambton High School had an enrolment of 1153 students with a diverse student population, including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, students with non-English speaking backgrounds, and students with disability.

Lambton High School, like many others, places a strong emphasis on expecting high achievements from its students. It provides a caring and culturally safe learning environment that promotes engagement, challenge, and a sense of belonging for all students. The school takes pride in students' accomplishments across various domains such as sports, leadership, cultural activities, and the creative and performing arts. It also offers a wide range of opportunities for students, including high potential and gifted programs, extracurricular activities, and effective support programs. The school makes active efforts to allocate targeted funding for students with disability in mainstream classrooms who require additional learning support. Acceleration in different subjects and support during transitional phases are also provided. Active student leadership, including a robust Student Representative Council, reflects the value placed on student input in decision-making processes. Lambton High School works closely with parents, carers, partner primary schools, community organisations, and businesses to make important decisions and plans for the school.

Lambton High School started their journey towards boosting students' sense of belonging after the COVID lockdowns of 2020. The school acknowledged the impact of the lockdown on the general wellbeing of its students and actively sought to provide them with intensive support.

<sup>1</sup> A school-level index of educational disadvantage with a mean (average) of 100 and a standard deviation of 50. Higher values indicate greater levels of need.

**New Lambton South Public School** is also located on Awabakal land in Newcastle for students in Kindergarten–Year 6, with a student population of approximately 456 in 2023. The school has a Family Occupation and Education Index of 39 in 2021, indicating that like Lambton High School, it serves a relatively advantaged population. The school has a diverse student population, with 3% identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and 13% as having a background language other than English.

New Lambton South Public School offers unique features such as a Regional Opportunity Class for high-potential or Gifted and Talented students, and strives to provide a curriculum that challenges every student to achieve their best. The school values community involvement and conducted a situational analysis with input from students, staff, parents, and the local AECG (Aboriginal Education Consultative Group) to develop a strategic improvement plan.

New Lambton South Public School did not identify specific catalysts that prompted a school-wide emphasis on sense of belonging for students. However, the principal has always been grounded in the belief that fostering strong connections facilitates effective learning in the classroom. From the beginning of his time at the school, he has sought to build protective capabilities within students, such as resilience and emotional intelligence, to support their wellbeing. He credits this intentional focus on student wellbeing as an important factor which contributed to the school's positive sense of belonging outcomes, as reflected in Tell Them From Me (TTFM) data.

Both schools went on their own journeys dedicated to enhancing the sense of belonging among their student cohort. They made deliberate efforts to foster strong connections with the broader community and facilitate open communication with parents and caregivers.





## Strategies employed by the case study schools to facilitate sense of belonging

Lambton High School and New Lambton South Public School were chosen for this research because both schools have sense of belonging scores that are higher than the NSW average, despite state trends in TTFM data indicating that students' sense of belonging scores have been declining across both primary and secondary schools. The two schools are explored in this one case study due to their proximity to each other, in addition to their collaborative ways of enhancing students' sense of belonging. New Lambton South Public School has established the foundation for students' strong sense of belonging in their early years, while Lambton High School has successfully uplifted sense of belonging for students in older years. The purpose of this research series is to find the schools' similar approaches to enhance students' sense of belonging to benefit the wider Lambton community, as well as their school-specific initiatives that uplift sense of belonging in their respective school communities.

There were four broad common themes across the two schools to maintain and uplift students' sense of belonging:

- positive student and teacher relationships
- schools acting as a wellbeing hub for the community
- student-centered approaches to wellbeing
- an emphasis on parental inclusion.

## Positive student and teacher relationships

Building relationships between teachers and students is crucial for creating an environment where students feel safe and valued. The foundation of rapport encourages students to feel secure in expressing their interests and seeking support. Lambton High School and New Lambton South Public School have integrated strategies to ensure students feel that their voice is valued, and their wellbeing prioritised, through trusting relationships developed with teachers.

New Lambton South Public School fosters rapport between students and teachers through their emphasis on relational support from the first day of school. The initial five weeks of each school year are reserved for "low pressure, high connectedness" activities, including learning the classroom routines, developing a mindset for resilience, and ensuring that all students feel deeply known by the classroom teacher. This focus on creating safety in the first few weeks means that all students, including those who may be feeling anxious about their transition to school, can find a sense of belonging with their teachers and peers. Strong foundations of student-teacher relationships are also facilitated by the implementation of a thorough handover at the end of each school year. Students' current classroom teachers will provide information to the following year's teachers about students' interests, strengths, and areas of improvement so that their future teacher can immediately build strong relationships and drive learning progress.



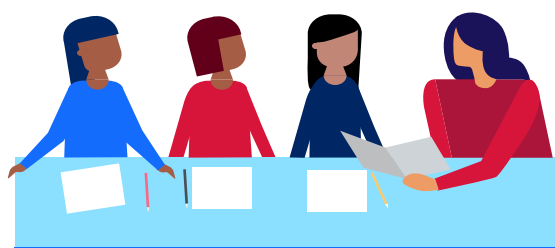
At Lambton High School, the executive staff and classroom teachers take the approach of “wrapping around” the students with a strong wellbeing team who build consistent rapport with students as they progress through high school. The team consists of wellbeing advisors, the Head Teacher Wellbeing, Student Support Officers, Learning Assistant Support Teachers (LaST), and external support from providers as needed. To further facilitate each student’s sense of connection to their teachers, the school has established a formal mentoring program which is timetabled to run once a week. The program is based on The Resilience Project, and focuses on the elements of gratitude, empathy, mindfulness, and emotional literacy. The consistent weekly mentoring sessions anchor students to learning about wellbeing on an ongoing basis. Finally, students are assigned a dedicated teacher (including senior executive staff) for their homeroom class, who will stay with them for the duration of their high school journey from Year 7 onwards. This 20-minute block of time with the same teacher provides students with opportunities to build close relationships with an informal mentor from the beginning of high school.

## A wellbeing hub for the community

Lambton High School and New Lambton South High School serve as important hubs within their community by drawing on specialised external programs to enhance students’ sense of belonging at school and encouraging a sense of connection for students transitioning between the two schools, implementing wellbeing initiatives that create community cohesion.

Lambton High School and New Lambton South Public School’s collaborative approaches to student wellbeing mean both schools act as centralised hubs for student wellbeing. The schools draw upon external providers to run various programs to holistically address students’ mental and emotional health, promoting an overall improvement in sense of belonging at school and out in the wider community. The external providers bring specialised expertise and support to address various aspects of student wellbeing. Lambton High School draws on the services of Relationships Australia to provide counselling and workshops to help students navigate personal relationships and emotional challenges. Other external providers focus on drug and alcohol information, specifically targeting students struggling with vaping, providing education and support to address substance use concerns. The school has plans to extend external programs to parents, recognising the importance of involving families in wellbeing initiatives. In addition, the school organises dedicated wellbeing days for students in Years 7-12. These days are led by the student leadership team, empowering students to actively participate in shaping positive initiatives within the school.

Similarly at New Lambton South Public School, external programs have been offered to targeted student groups to enhance their wellbeing. One such initiative is the relational aggression program for girls, which aims to equip them with the necessary skills to navigate and address relational conflicts effectively. This program was introduced as a result of school-based data which showed that girls experienced hidden relational conflict amongst themselves. It provides girls with strategies to identify and manage relational aggression, fostering healthy and respectful relationships among students. By empowering girls to understand and address issues related to relationships, the school creates a safe and inclusive environment where they can thrive and feel a sense of belonging.



In the primary setting at New Lambton South Public School, the importance of emotional resilience and intelligence for boys has been recognised and the school has implemented a program specifically designed to develop these skills. This program provides boys with the tools and knowledge to understand and control their feelings effectively. By fostering emotional resilience and intelligence, the school equips boys with the necessary skills to navigate challenges, manage their emotions, and build healthy relationships. This program promotes a positive and inclusive culture for boys, enabling them to develop a strong sense of self and belonging within the school community.

Both schools actively collaborate with each other and other schools in the community to support student transitions and cross-school activities. For example, Lambton High School organises science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM) days, challenges, and sporting events in collaboration with their feeder primary schools. These activities provide an interactive and hands-on experience for students, allowing them to explore various aspects of science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics. The collaborative nature of these events fosters teamwork, builds relationships between primary and secondary school students, and helps alleviate any anxieties associated with the transition process. Moreover, the school offers enrichment classes, including creative arts enrichment, within its campus. These classes are popular among students from the feeder primary schools, including New Lambton South Public School, as they provide an opportunity to further develop their skills and interests in areas such as visual arts, music and drama.

In addition to inter-school collaboration, both Lambton High School and New Lambton South Public School have created their own ways of fostering student belonging as a community hub. To provide comprehensive wellbeing support, Lambton High School has a dedicated Student Support Officer. Leveraging her connections with external agencies and community groups, the Student Support Officer supports vulnerable students and collaborates with other government departments in Newcastle to ensure coordinated support for students and their families. By tapping into external resources, Lambton High School strengthens its ability to provide targeted interventions and assistance to students facing challenges. The collaboration with external agencies allows the school to access specialised services and expertise.

At New Lambton South Public School, the school has implemented The Resilience Project. This initiative focuses on cultivating gratitude, empathy, and mindfulness as non-negotiable elements of daily practice within the school. Through formal weekly lessons centered around each of these elements, students learn the importance of building resilience, fostering positive relationships, and developing a greater appreciation for themselves and those around them. The school reinforces these concepts by including weekly columns in the school newsletters, providing ongoing reminders and opportunities for students to reflect on and practise gratitude, empathy, and mindfulness.



Lambton High School places great importance on building a strong connection with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) to support students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and promote academic achievement. The school actively collaborates with the AECG to ensure that the needs of Aboriginal students are met and that their cultural identity is celebrated within the school community. This partnership has led to continuous growth and improvement in the academic achievements of Aboriginal students. To recognise the accomplishments of these students, Lambton High School participates in local and state AECG awards, where students are acknowledged and celebrated annually. These awards serve as a testament to the school's commitment to supporting Aboriginal students and fostering their sense of belonging, cultural pride, and academic success.

## Student-centred approaches to wellbeing

Students' sense of belonging is fostered through recognition of their individual needs, interests, and strengths. A student-centred approach to wellbeing promotes active engagement in the school culture, while encouraging them to take ownership over their own learning. Both Lambton High School and New Lambton South Public School have implemented strategies to acknowledge that each student at their school is an important contributor to the learning community, fostering a deep sense of belonging and connection.

At New Lambton South Public School, the emphasis is on making sure high expectations for students are matched with high support from teachers for their wellbeing. This philosophy can be seen through their personalised strategies for student wellbeing and their provision of extracurricular activities to spark individual students' interests.

The school acknowledges that students' behaviours are often an expression of their thoughts, feelings, and needs. Teachers make a conscious effort to observe and interpret students' behaviors as a form of communication. By adopting this perspective, they aim to uncover the underlying reasons behind challenging behaviours, such as frustration or anxiety. With the support of executive staff, teachers work with students to find targeted methods to help with the regulation and communication of emotions. They also collaborate with parents to discuss the best strategies that can be used for students to regulate themselves at school, so that students are supported in multiple ways. This approach has allowed teachers to respond to students with empathy and understanding, leading to students' increased ability to regulate their emotions and find a sense of belonging in a supportive classroom environment.

New Lambton South Public School also places a strong emphasis on extracurricular activities that align with students' interests, recognising the value of child development beyond the academic curriculum. The school's vision revolves around creating a creative space that inspires everyone to do their best. To achieve this, the school actively considers the needs and interests of their students when designing their learning experiences. Extracurricular activities such as cooking, clay molding, textiles, and woodwork are offered, providing avenues for students to explore and develop their passions. The school is committed to providing weekly opportunities for students to engage in activities they love, fostering their sense of belonging and enjoyment in participating in the school community. By providing opportunities to nurture students' interests where possible, the school cultivates an environment where students can thrive and feel fully engaged in the classroom.

For Lambton High School, student-centered approaches to wellbeing are focused on connection during online learning, having a strong Student Representative Council, ensuring inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and building a physical space known as the wellbeing hub where students can take some time for themselves.





During the challenging period of online learning due to COVID-19, the school recognised the importance of maintaining a sense of connection among students. To address this, the school organised activities and events that encouraged students to engage with one another. One example was during “R U OK Day,” where students played R U OK bingo, fostering conversations about mental health and wellbeing. These initiatives aimed to recreate the social atmosphere of the school and promote peer support, even in a virtual setting. Regular whole group meetings for senior students, facilitated by executive staff, allowed students to have informal chats not limited to schoolwork. This enabled students to maintain relationships with their peers and teachers, fostering a sense of belonging despite the physical distance.

The school has developed a robust Aboriginal Education team over the years, recognising the significance of supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The team organised weekly activities tailored to the cultural needs and interests of these students. Initiatives such as the Junior AECG (Aboriginal Education Consultative Group), Sister Speak, and Sister Speak dance group provided platforms for cultural expression, sharing of experiences, and empowerment. A cultural camp, involving approximately 60 students, further enhanced a sense of belonging by fostering a strong connection to cultural identity and community. These initiatives demonstrate the school's commitment to creating an inclusive environment that values and supports Aboriginal students.

The school has placed great importance on student voice and empowerment. The SRC and leadership program involves a total of 40 students, ensuring that students from Year 7 to 12 have the opportunity to contribute and shape the school's policies and activities. By involving students in decision-making processes, the school recognises their perspectives and ideas as valuable contributions to the school community.

To address students' wellbeing needs and provide a safe space for relaxation, the school established a dedicated wellbeing hub. The hub features a breakfast club open for all students, where they can start their day with a nutritious meal, promoting physical wellbeing. In addition, the hub offers card games and sensory toys, providing students with activities that engage their minds and promote stress relief. The wellbeing hub is a supportive environment where students can take time for themselves during moments of heightened emotions or stress. By offering a space for students to unwind, the school has demonstrated its commitment to their overall wellbeing, reinforcing their sense of belonging and care within the school community.





## Emphasising parent engagement and inclusion

Creating a partnership between home and school is crucial to fostering students' sense of belonging. Collaboration with parents and families can create a cohesive support system for students' growth and sense of belonging to the school. Lambton High School and New Lambton South Public School have actively cultivated parents and families' sense of belonging to the school community by inviting them into the school gates and maintaining open communication.

Lambton High School places great emphasis on parent engagement by recognising the importance of fostering positive outlooks towards the school and building strong relationships with parents. The school implements a comprehensive transition program including parent evenings at the beginning of the year specifically for Year 7 students, aiming to ease their transition into high school. Additionally, year group meetings are held on evenings throughout the year for parents of students in Years 10–12. These meetings provide opportunities for parents to visit the school alongside their child and engage with executive staff and classroom teachers to discuss education pathways and raise any concerns. This separate avenue for communication is implemented in addition to traditional parent-teacher interviews, allowing for deeper conversations and a collaborative approach to supporting students' sense of belonging.

To celebrate student success and acknowledge their achievements, Lambton High School holds Rose Ceremonies. These ceremonies take place at every year level and serve as a platform to recognise student excellence. The focus is not solely on academic achievements, but also on students who have made gains and displayed notable progress in various areas. Each teacher nominates five students from their class who have shown exceptional growth or achievements, highlighting the holistic nature of success. The nominated students, along with their parents, are invited to a celebratory breakfast where they are honoured by the deputy principals and year advisors. The Rose Awards accumulate throughout the years, culminating in the Gold Rose Award. This initiative has received positive feedback from parents, who appreciate the opportunity to witness and understand their child's progress and accomplishments across Years 7-12, providing them with a comprehensive picture of their child's growth throughout their educational journey.

Creating a welcoming school community is a top priority for the principal of Lambton High School, who continually seeks new ways to engage parents and bring them inside the school gates. The school actively explores innovative approaches to involve parents in school activities and initiatives. By fostering a sense of belonging and inclusivity, the school creates a collaborative partnership between parents, teachers, and students, ensuring that everyone feels valued and actively involved in the educational process.

At New Lambton South Public School, the principal has invested significant time and effort into nurturing the connections between parents and the school. One strategy employed by the school is facilitating a smooth handover process between parents and classroom teachers, particularly through assistant principals. This ensures that teachers have a deep understanding of their students, eliminating the need to start the conversation from scratch each year. By maintaining continuity and familiarity, teachers can better identify and address students' individual needs, promoting students' feeling of being connected to the classroom teacher.

The principal also takes a proactive approach to communication within the school community, particularly when it comes to incidents involving students. The principal actively engages with the school community, often being present in the gardens in the morning and having staff members stationed at the gates to warmly welcome students. This visible presence not only creates a sense of security and accessibility but also serves as an opportunity for the principal to connect with parents and engage in open dialogue. By demonstrating a proactive and approachable attitude, the principal ensures that communication flows smoothly between the school and parents, fostering a strong sense of community and trust.

## Conclusion

Every student at school deserves to be known, valued, and cared for. This case study highlights four key factors that contribute to a nurturing and inclusive school environment, where sense of belonging is actively fostered. Relationships and trust between students and teachers form the foundation for a positive learning experience, building a sense of belonging and emotional safety where all students can nurture their individual interests and talents. Embracing a student-centered approach to well-being recognises the individual needs and strengths of students, empowering them to take ownership of their learning and fostering a deeper sense of belonging. In addition, transition programs and external support from the local community play a vital role in facilitating a smooth transition between students' educational stages and connecting students to their broader community. Finally, parent engagement is at the heart of both schools' success at building a foundation of belonging for all students. Partnerships between the schools are important for strengthening connections and creating a unified support system where students are holistically cared for.



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