

Fact sheet

How a positive sense of belonging helps students thrive

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

Sense of belonging reflects the extent to which students feel connected to their school environment, personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others at school.

Figure 1

Belonging is a foundation for success at school



Why is sense of belonging important?

When students feel a strong sense of belonging at school, they are more likely to be engaged at school, staying in school longer, attending more and achieving higher academic outcomes. In NSW public schools, this is particularly the case for younger high school students and students with low socioeconomic status or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Students with a strong sense of belonging also tend to be happier, have better self-esteem, cope better with challenges and report a lower level of bullying at their school. A sense of belonging is particularly important during periods of transition, including moving from primary to secondary school and for post-school transitions.

Key research findings

- Better school connectedness (sense of belonging) is linked to increased engagement at school, higher levels of academic achievement, school completion and reductions in antisocial or disruptive behaviours.¹
- Students who experience a positive sense of belonging at school show high levels of effort, interest and motivation, leading to improved learning outcomes.²
- A student in Year 5 with positive friendships in school is at least 2 months ahead in their NAPLAN reading scores by Year 7 than a student without.³
- A student in Year 10 with positive teacher-student relationships has a 3 percentage points higher predicted school completion rate than a student without.⁴
- School belonging can foster students' everyday resilience – that is, their ability to overcome setbacks.⁵
- For Aboriginal students in Year 7, improvements in sense of belonging, pride in school and feeling that their culture is understood by their teachers could result in up to 5 additional days spent in school per year.⁶



How can schools protect against the decline in belonging?

Data from NSW schools shows that sense of belonging at school has been declining in both primary and secondary schools since 2017. Tell Them From Me student survey analysis shows certain school characteristics can help protect against the decline in belonging or even work to raise it:

- Schools with lower levels of bullying, and higher levels of positive peer relationships and participation in sports and clubs, tend to have lower levels of decline in belonging – or even large increases.
- Schools with more positive teacher–student relations, advocacy at school, teacher expectations for students’ success, and more effective classroom management also record more positive changes in sense of belonging.
- In NSW schools, teacher wellbeing is positively associated with changes in students’ sense of belonging.

Sense of belonging and Our Plan for NSW Public Education

The department’s commitment that ‘every student is known, valued and cared for’ highlights the inextricable link between wellbeing and learning in the context of schooling. Students’ sense of belonging at school is an important component of student wellbeing recognised in Our Plan for NSW Public Education. Further information on the plan’s sense of belonging success measure can be found in the [Measuring student wellbeing for school improvement fact sheet](#).

Sense of belonging and the School Excellence Framework

The School Excellence Framework (SEF) supports schools by describing key elements of high-quality practice across the 3 domains of learning, teaching and leading. Schools use the framework to assess their practices and inform their Strategic Improvement Plans and annual reports. Research shows sense of belonging is linked to multiple elements within the SEF and can be used to support schools’ improvement across many focus areas. Figure 2 on the following page highlights the positive correlation between students’ sense of belonging and various elements in the model.

Related resources from the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE)

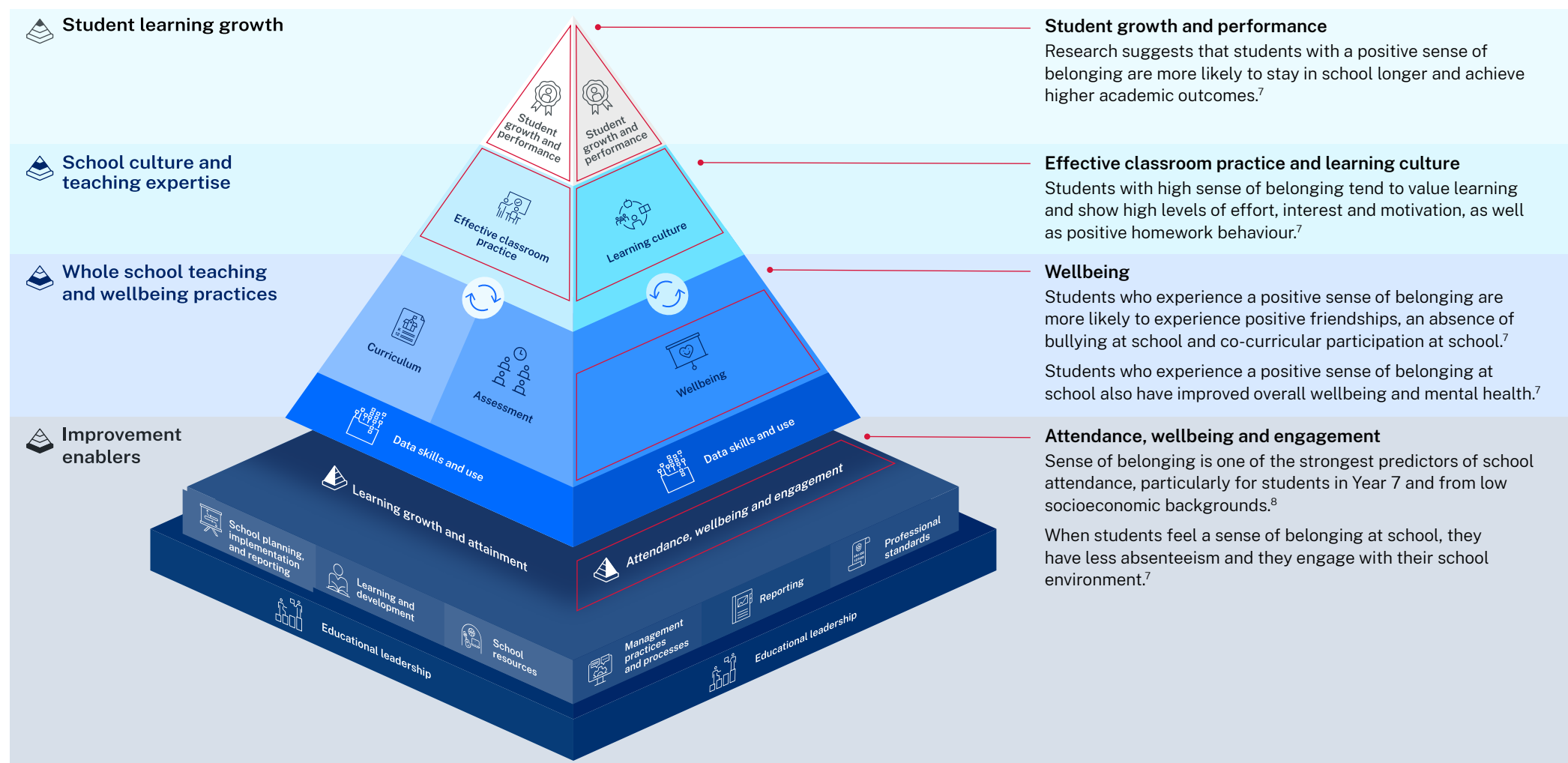
For more information on what you can do to promote sense of belonging at your school, refer to the following CESE publications:

- [Supporting students’ sense of belonging](#)
- [Every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools – an environmental scan](#)
- [What works best: 2020 update](#)
- [Making sense of belonging](#)
- [Everyday resilience – what works best in practice](#)
- [Supporting Aboriginal students to attain the HSC](#)
- [The role of student engagement in the transition from primary to secondary school](#)
- [Understanding attendance](#).

Notes

- 1 Australian Catholic University and Erebus International (2008) *Scoping study into approaches to student wellbeing: literature review*, report to the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra.
- 2 CESE (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation) (2020) [Supporting students’ sense of belonging – every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools](#), NSW Department of Education, accessed 15 March 2024.
- 3 CESE (2019) ‘How high expectations and engagement in primary school drive student learning’, *Learning Curve Issue 22*, NSW Department of Education, accessed 15 March 2024.
- 4 CESE (2019) ‘Supporting school completion: the importance of engagement and effective teaching’, *Learning Curve Issue 21*, NSW Department of Education, accessed 15 March 2024.
- 5 CESE (2022) [Everyday resilience – what works best in practice](#), NSW Department of Education, accessed 15 March 2024.
- 6 CESE (2022) [Understanding attendance – a review of the drivers of school attendance and best practice approaches](#), NSW Department of Education, accessed 15 March 2024.

Figure 2
Sense of belonging and the SEF Improvement Model



7 CESE (2020) *Supporting students' sense of belonging – every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools*, NSW Department of Education, accessed 15 March 2024.

8 CESE (2022) *Understanding attendance – a review of the drivers of school attendance and best practice approaches*, NSW Department of Education, accessed 15 March 2024.