

Macarthur Girls High 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.

You can also subscribe to the [CESE newsletter](#) and connect with us on [Viva Engage](#).

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

Created / last updated: July 2024

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

About Macarthur Girls High School

Macarthur Girls High School is a single-sex high school located on Dharug land in Parramatta for students in Year 7 to Year 12. As of 2023, Macarthur Girls High School has an enrolment of 1084 students. 94% of students are from non-English speaking backgrounds. The school has a Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI)¹ of 59, indicating that it serves a relatively socioeconomically advantaged population.

Macarthur Girls High School has been recognised for driving effective and high impact practices for student success. They have strategic goals to customise learning and wellbeing for all students, with individual learning goals developed for each student throughout the school year. They pride themselves on the cultural diversity of their student cohort which is celebrated during various multicultural events. The principal and other executive staff have three main priorities for students' wellbeing at the school: safety (including psychological safety), respect and learning. They believe that if students feel safe physically, psychologically and emotionally at school, they will be more inclined to take sensible risks in their learning and do their best regardless of the outcome.

Macarthur Girls High School was chosen for this research due to its high sense of belonging scores in the Tell Them From Me student survey relative to the NSW average. In 2021, sense of belonging at Macarthur Girls High School was 8.8% higher than the NSW average and the school's historical data reveals a consistent pattern of strong sense of belonging scores. In 2022, this score was 10.81% higher than the NSW average, and in 2023, 8.89% higher.



¹ 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.

Challenges in fostering sense of belonging for girls

Research suggests that girls are at higher risk than boys of having low levels of belonging at school, and that gap is widening (Making sense of belonging 2024).

Other strategies that might support belonging for girls include:

- adopting cohort-based targeted programs, bringing together groups of girls for certain activities specific to their wellbeing (Every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools – an environmental scan 2018)
- some girls may require intentional prompting and encouragement from teachers to facilitate participation and engagement (Supporting students' learning 2018).

Strategies employed by Macarthur Girls High School

Macarthur Girls High School centres on multiculturalism and diversity to define belonging. The executive staff emphasise the importance of students from different nationalities coming together and collectively celebrating their cultural identities. The school also emphasises the importance of sense of belonging that students experience when they come together from varied cultural backgrounds with acceptance and understanding of their peers' differences.

This case study explores different ways Macarthur Girls High School supports and maintains a positive sense of belonging for students, given its context as a single sex girls school. The strategies discussed include:

- valuing student input
- focusing on whole-school values
- collaborating to share success.

These strategies and their practical applications are outlined for other schools to consider for use as part of their own practice and can be adapted or modified for schools' contexts and needs.



Valuing student input

Within schools, executive staff such as the principal, deputy principal and other teachers in leadership positions are at the centre of ensuring students' wellbeing. Executive staff at Macarthur Girls High School pride themselves on being present and approachable figures for students. They believe that a strong sense of belonging is facilitated when executive staff are accessible by students in the classroom and around the playground. Students indicate they feel free to speak with any member of the executive staff if they have any personal or academic issues, knowing that they will listen and offer advice where they can.

This foundation of trust means that executive staff can act as informal mentors. The principal takes on several blocks of English lessons per week as a classroom teacher, making her a visible female role model for the girls at the school. Her approach to teaching and learning encourages sensible risk taking to reassure students that learning can sometimes be uncomfortable. This helps to build girls' resilience and to think differently and challenge their perspectives. Other staff at the school acknowledge the importance of relational trust with girls and consistently strive to build positive rapport with students. They intentionally have warm interactions with students, such as asking about events that students have attended over the weekend.

The executive staff understands that schools are built on relational trust. This sense of trust between executive staff and students is emphasised at Macarthur Girls High School, with an acknowledgment from the principal that single sex girls' schools are complex learning environments built on relationships. This has led the executive to ensure that they are transparent about the decisions they make about the school and to take accountability for mistakes when things go wrong. For example, when an issue about assessments arose during a recent exam period, the principal met with all affected students to discuss the problem, explain why certain decisions had been made and answer any questions students had. For executive staff, these everyday actions that build relational trust are an important part of facilitating students' sense of belonging. Students feel included as part of the school community as the same unified 'team,' and decisions impacting students are made in collaboration with them rather than being imposed upon them.





Focusing on whole-school values

At Macarthur Girls High School, students and staff abide by a core set of values to build collective unity. The values are known by the acronym, PRIDE: Participation, Respect, Integrity, Diversity and Excellence. These values and their surrounding language are used by the school community so that everyone is on the same page concerning the expectations and responsibilities of being a member of the school. When issues with individual students arise, the principal refers to the school's PRIDE values during discussions with students to address which core values were compromised and what solutions could be implemented.

The PRIDE values are woven into the fabric of daily school life. During roll call, classroom teachers run planned lessons three days per week on student wellbeing. These structured lessons are known as PRIDE activities. During each term, the school holds a celebration assembly for students consistently demonstrating PRIDE values. During the assembly, leaders from the Student Representative Council and Sports Council deliver speeches promoting a specific PRIDE value to their peers. Parents and caregivers of award winners are invited to this assembly to witness the celebration of core values taking place at the school.

Involving students, staff and families in celebrating PRIDE values has a positive impact on the school community. All students at Macarthur Girls High School are aware of how the PRIDE values should be demonstrated, creating an environment where students are united by strong principles.

Collaborating to share success

The principal believes that implementing successful strategies to promote students' sense of belonging should not stop at the school level but should expand to other schools in the local area. Macarthur Girls High School collaborates with schools in the same principal network to cross-pollinate strategies around student wellbeing. Each school has its own unique context and wellbeing strategies to create a positive learning environment. The collaboration between principals offers the opportunity to work constructively and share how sense of belonging is being promoted within each unique school context. At the beginning of the year in 2023, all the principals in the network met and hosted a brief tour of their schools. The tour was followed by a presentation to showcase unique initiatives at the school, including wellbeing strategies for students and staff.

For classroom teachers, the school encourages Teach Meets within Macarthur Girls High School to support the sharing of classroom strategies that can work across different subject areas. Classroom teachers have connected on a regular basis to discuss activities that have worked very well in their lessons to increase student engagement (for example, short quizzes using individual mini whiteboards for students). The intent is to increase collaboration between staff and promote cohesive strategies across the school. This process can help unify the school and develop a school culture that students can feel a strong sense of connection to.

Macarthur Girls High School is united in its belief that belonging involves connection between students and staff beyond the individual school. The principal believes strategies to foster positive sense of belonging should filter beyond the school gates and out into the wider education community, especially if the strategies are working well. By actively seeking community feedback about ways to support families and their daughters, the school enhances its image as an educational community that promotes belonging and inclusivity for all students, staff and families.

Conclusion

Macarthur Girls High School strives to enhance students' belonging with a multifaceted approach. The principal is committed to knowing and understanding her students, the school strives to forge connections between staff and students and promote belonging for all by having a deliberate focus on sense of belonging. The principal and other executive staff hold an approachable presence at school by actively engaging in positive interactions with students. They prioritise student feedback and are open to actioning this where possible, promoting a culture of trust between students and staff. A whole-school emphasis on the core values of PRIDE (Participation, Integrity, Diversity and Excellence) provides a strong foundation for creating an environment where all students feel connected to common goals. Finally, collaboration within and across schools shows the commitment of Macarthur Girls High School to sharing strategies that boost sense of belonging and create a cohesive school environment. By combining these approaches, the school has created a nurturing culture for girls to maintain positive wellbeing and thrive.



Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

GPO Box 33, Sydney NSW 2001, Australia

✉ info@cese.nsw.gov.au

🌐 education.nsw.gov.au/cese

🗨️ yammer.com/det.nsw.edu.au

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Please cite this publication as:

CESE (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation) (2024) *Macarthur Girls High School – Sense of belonging research series*, NSW Department of Education.

