

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Supporting advocacy at school

Every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



Introduction

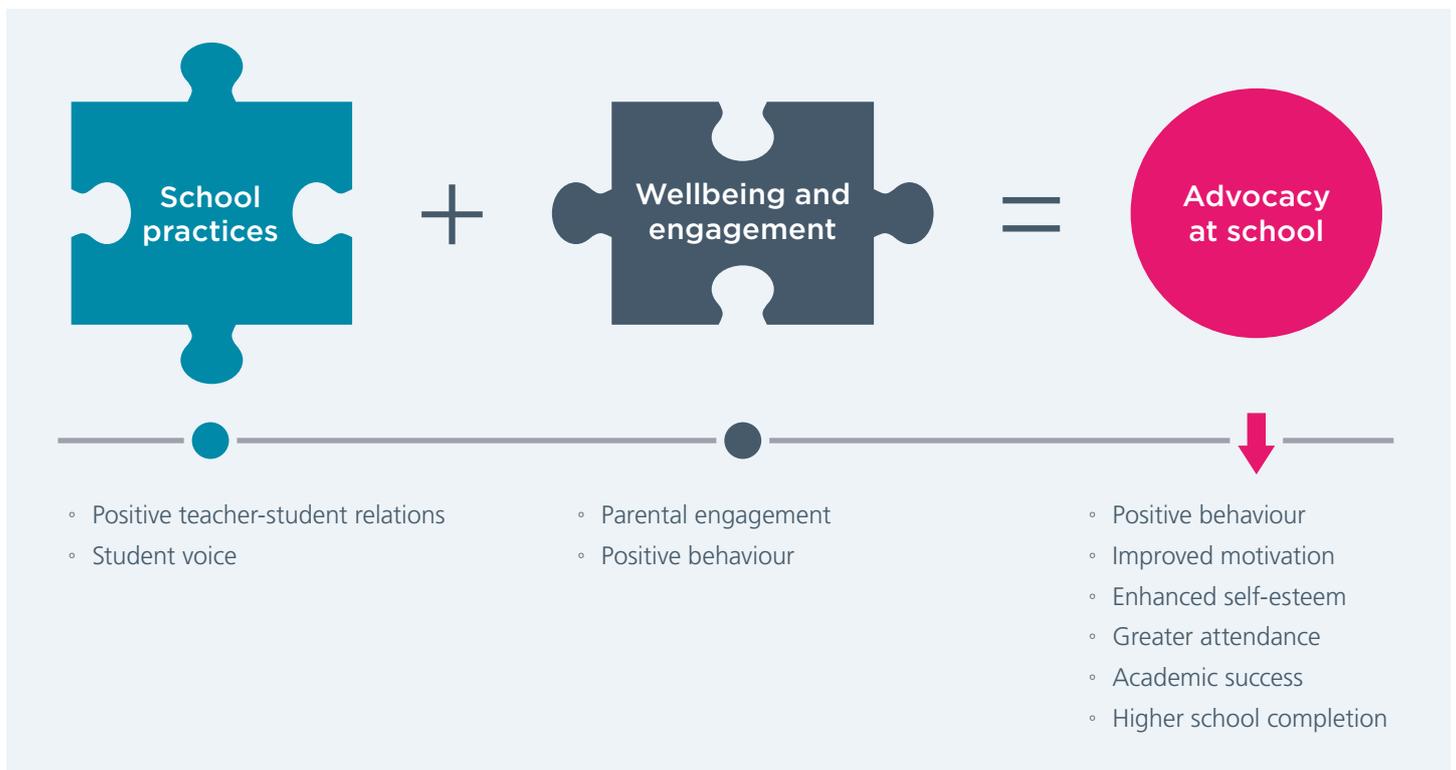
When students feel that they are advocated for at school, they feel that they have someone who they can turn to for help and advice, they feel cared for and are supported to achieve their best. This synthesis of research explains why student advocacy at school is important and provides practical suggestions for schools to support their students.

Advocacy at school for students in NSW public schools

Students report on the level of advocacy at school that they experience in the student survey offered to NSW public schools – Tell Them From Me. Tell Them From Me (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 student advocacy at school, 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 enhance student sense of belonging¹ and high expectations for success² and to support school improvement with TTFM³.

Key findings

- Students who experience high levels of advocacy at school have improved learning and wellbeing outcomes and are also more likely to have:
 - increased motivation and effort in lessons
 - an enhanced sense of belonging
 - an improved chance of completing school.
- Advocacy at school is linked to both student engagement and wellbeing and teaching practices.
- Teachers and staff can be effective advocates at school by encouraging student voice and incorporating it into decision-making at school. Teachers can encourage student voice by investing time in getting to know their students, having conversations with students about their learning and aspirations, and responding to student surveys and student feedback.
- Students experience different levels of advocacy at school at different stages of their schooling. Students from high socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to report higher levels of advocacy at school than those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, while girls and boys experience advocacy differently at different stages of their schooling.
- Schools are able to promote advocacy for students by focusing on periods of transition, providing opportunities to build relationships, encouraging student voice, establishing programs to get to know their students and providing targeted support.



¹ Supporting sense of belonging.

² Supporting high expectations.

³ Supporting school improvement.

What is advocacy at school?

Advocacy at school refers to the support students receive from adults in the school who can provide encouragement and who can be turned to for advice. Students feel advocacy at school when they have adults who will listen to them and act in their best interests. Although parents and carers play the most vital role in the lives of most children, relationships with adults at school help ensure that students are cared for and supported to achieve their best.

Why is advocacy at school important?

Advocacy at school promotes positive outcomes for both students' academic achievement and their wellbeing. Research shows that having good relationships with teachers is positively linked to students' motivation and effort in school. In turn, higher levels of motivation and effort positively impact students' academic achievement. Good relationships with teachers or counsellors at school is particularly beneficial for students who are at risk of low achievement. Good relationships with learning support officers and school administrative staff are also beneficial for all students, particularly students with disability or additional learning needs. Advocacy at school can also help to support students as they transition to high school, as it has a positive impact on students' sense of belonging, which, in turn, promotes enhanced wellbeing and achievement at school.⁴ Positive teacher-student relationships are also important for promoting school completion.

How do we measure advocacy at school?

In NSW, schools are able to examine the extent to which students report high levels of advocacy at school through data collected in the Tell Them From Me student survey. The survey asks students if they have someone at school who cares about them, provides encouragement and who can be turned to for advice.



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 advocacy at school at different stages of their schooling, and that advocacy is lower in secondary school than in primary school (Figure 1).

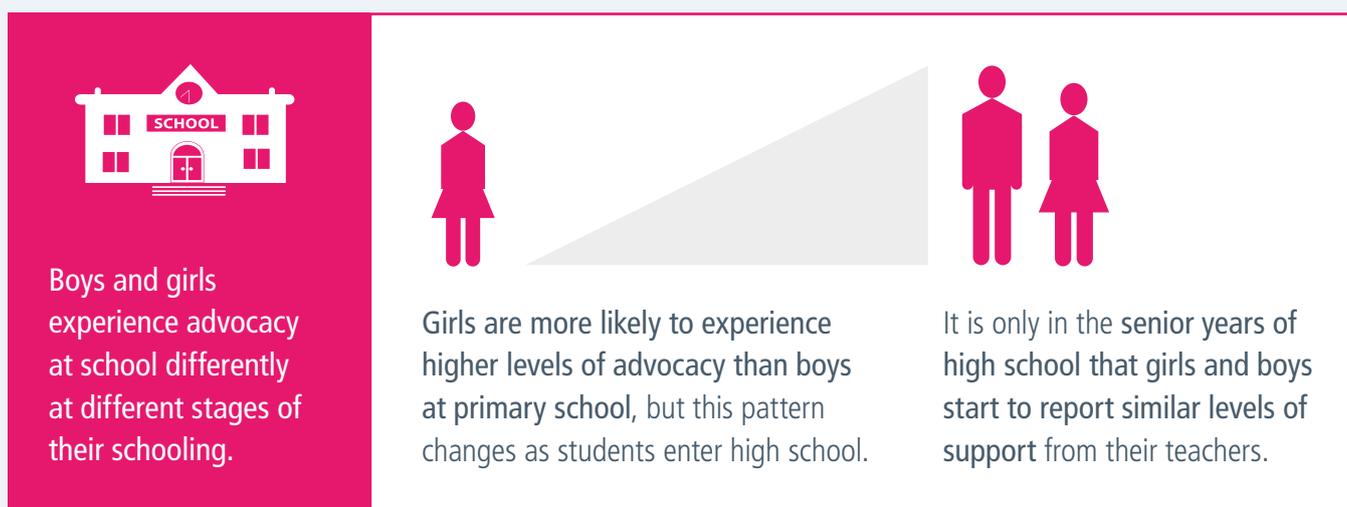
Students' reports of the level of advocacy that they experience at school differ by gender and by socioeconomic (SES) status. Students of high-SES backgrounds are more likely to report higher levels of advocacy at school than those of low-SES

backgrounds, while girls and boys experience advocacy differently at different stages of their schooling (Figure 2)⁵. Girls are more likely to experience higher levels of advocacy than boys at primary school, but this pattern changes as students enter high school. It is only in the senior years of high school that girls and boys start to report similar levels of support from their teachers⁶.

Figure 1. Proportion of students reporting high levels of advocacy at school, 2019



Figure 2.



⁵ Supporting students' learning: Insights from students, parents and teachers.

⁶ Supporting students' learning: Insights from students, parents and teachers.

Improving advocacy at school⁷

Talk to students about their learning

Engaging students in conversations about their learning demonstrates to them that they are known and valued, and helps them feel that they are supported at school. Regular use of informal formative assessments, such as quick one-to-one feedback activities, can help to open the communication channels between teacher and students. In-class conversations during lessons also demonstrate to students that their teachers are interested and care about their learning and wellbeing.

Encourage student voice

When students have opportunities to have their say, they feel listened to and valued. Promoting student voice by asking for feedback, conducting surveys and encouraging suggestions can lead students to feel an enhanced sense of advocacy at school. In the classroom, teachers can encourage students to express any areas of confusion or concern, and should act on this information to help support students as they learn. Encouraging student voice shows students that their opinions and experiences are valued and important to their teachers and the school.

Provide targeted support

Some students are less likely to experience advocacy at school than others. Students also experience advocacy differently as they progress through school. Recognising when students are at risk of experiencing lower levels of advocacy is an important first step in ensuring that all students are supported throughout their schooling. Students of low-SES backgrounds and students in the early years of high school, particularly girls, are likely to require additional support from their teachers in order to reach their potential. Other student groups that may benefit from targeted support include those with English as an additional language/dialect (EAL/D), students in Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs) and students in support classes.

'The teachers are very enthusiastic and if you have an issue they will always do their best to fix it, even a little thing.'

Year 8 student, Ryde Secondary College

⁷ Findings are drawn from summaries of the literature in publications highlighted in the 'Find out more' section.



How are schools effectively supporting advocacy at school?

Building relationships across the school and parent community

For **Whalan Public School**⁸, advocacy at school refers to the active consideration and support of students' academic and wellbeing needs. The school provides high levels of advocacy for its students through a school environment focused on providing consistency and familiarity, and a commitment to improving parent and community engagement. The school implemented the 'Whalan 5', a set of five questions to focus its teachers and students on learning intentions, success criteria, goal-setting and feedback.

Establishing and encouraging mentorship programs for students fosters positive student-teacher relationships and helps students feel that they have an adult at school that they can turn to for support and advice. At **Penrith Valley School**⁹, each student is assigned a mentor teacher who is responsible for developing their Personalised Learning Plan and other documentation that enables staff to cater to their individual needs. Students have breakfast with their mentor twice each week, which provides them with opportunities to set goals and touch base about how they are travelling. This helps students feel supported at school and to develop the skills needed to build positive, respectful relationships outside of school.

At **Girraween High School**¹⁰, mentors support senior students as they prepare for the transition to life after school. The mentoring program is designed to allow students to select their own mentor, with meetings structured around different themes throughout the school year. The program provides support for students at this critical stage of their schooling, and strengthens relationships between teachers and students.

Building relationships with the parent community is also key to making sure students are supported at schools. **Plumpton High School**¹¹ runs parent-focused sessions around a host of issues, including literacy, numeracy, and mental health. These sessions allow the school to work with parents in a partnership to support their students.

Getting to know students

Whole-school programs and initiatives, as well as classroom practices, can help students to feel that they have a voice at school and are known and cared for by school staff.

Marrickville High School¹² uses wellbeing pastoral care programs and their Tell Them From Me data to better understand their students. These initiatives have enabled the school to identify student needs and develop targeted programs, focused on building students' motivation and overcoming anxiety, to promote students' success.

Sir Joseph Banks High School¹³ focuses on developing internal and external relationships, establishing proactive support systems and using data to focus school priorities to create a highly supportive school environment. The school's Learning and Support Team coordinates and develops support plans for students experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, difficulties at school, so that they can receive quick and appropriate attention.

Focussing on transition

Targeted programs for students in Years 6 and 7 help support students as they transition to high school, ensuring that they are ready to learn from day one at their new school. **Homebush West Public School**¹⁴ places a strong emphasis on preparing its students for the transition to high school. Students in Year 5 and 6 participate in 'middle school', where each student has their own timetable that requires them to change classrooms, classmates and teachers according to ability and subject. The 'middle school' approach allows students to build relationships with more than one teacher and become familiar with differing teacher expectations and approaches. This helps students prepare for high school and raises awareness of the type of support teachers can provide.

At **Cecil Hills High School**¹⁵, Year 7 year advisers play a leading role in laying the foundations for a positive transition to high school through a carefully planned and implemented transition program. This program begins when students are in Year 5. The appointed year adviser visits the school's three feeder primary schools and future students are invited to participate in 'sample high school' lessons at Cecil Hills. The strong relationship between Cecil Hills and its feeder schools means that the high school's teachers are able to work closely with their primary colleagues to understand their future students and plan appropriately to ensure a successful transition. These activities ensure that, as students enter Year 7, they are familiar with their new school and have a familiar teacher on hand to support them from day one.

8 Supporting students' learning: Resources.

9 Case studies: Penrith Valley School.

10 Supporting students' learning: Resources.

11 Supporting students' learning: Resources.

12 Supporting students' learning: Resources.

13 Supporting students' learning: Resources.

14 Case studies: Homebush West Public School.

15 Case studies: Cecil Hills High School.

Find out more

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

Case studies

These case studies describe strategies used in NSW public schools to promote positive outcomes for students, including high levels of advocacy 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 school completion: The importance of engagement and effective teaching

This publication and accompanying resources and case studies shows the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in promoting school completion.

www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/supporting-school-completion

How high expectations and engagement in primary school drive student learning

Case studies on how Liverpool West and Warwick Farm primary schools advocate for their students to promote academic success.

www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/how-high-expectations-and-engagement-in-primary-school-drive-student-learning

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

Supporting students' learning: Resources and case studies for schools, teachers and parents

CESE provides resources and case studies with suggestions for what schools can do to promote advocacy at school.

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

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

This publication shows the impact that high levels of advocacy 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

Using Tell Them From Me data to make school improvements – case studies

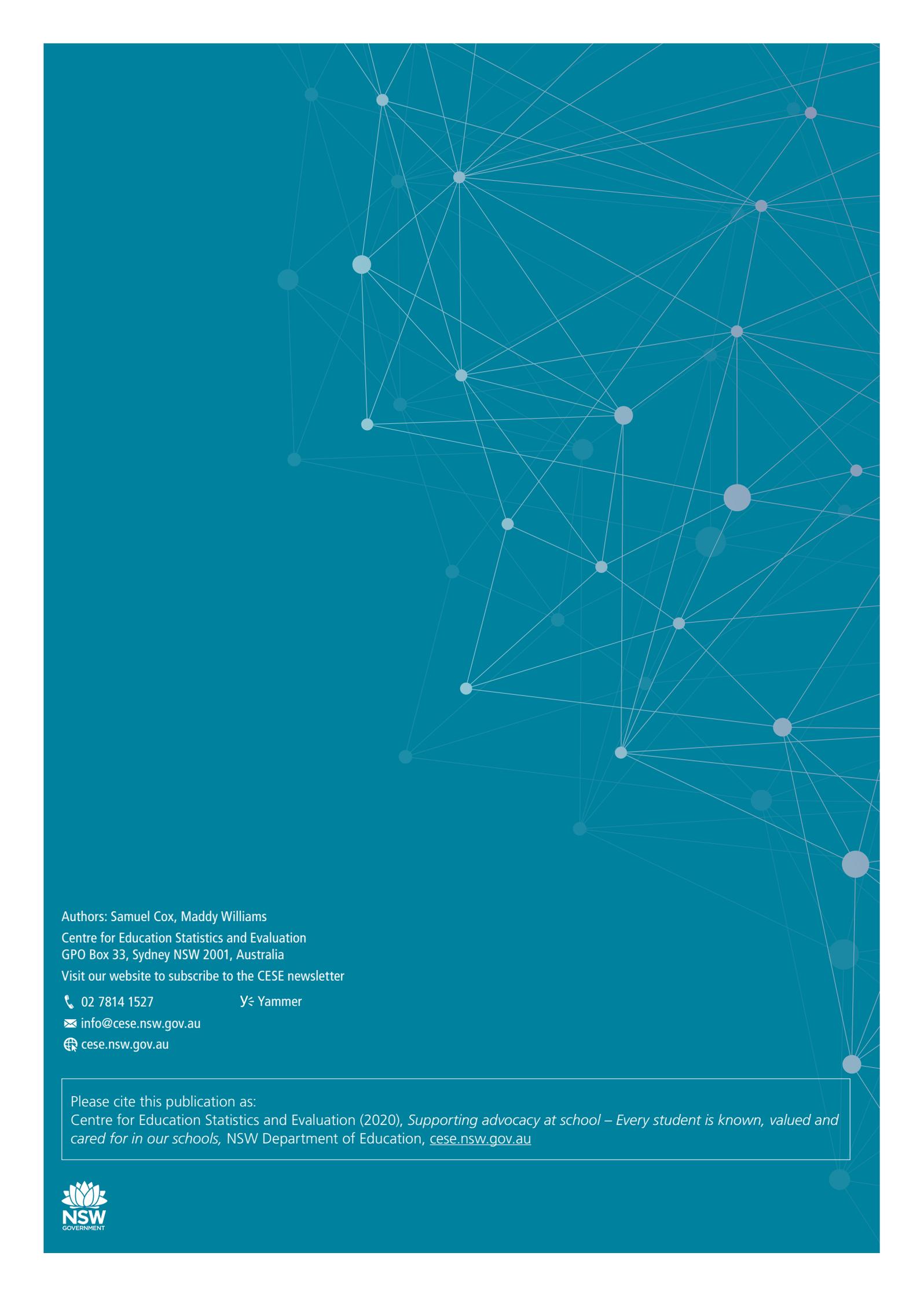
These case studies highlight how a variety of government schools have used Tell Them From Me survey data to identify and make broad improvements to student engagement, wellbeing and teaching practices.

<https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/case-studies-using-tell-them-from-me-data-to-make-school-improvements>

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

A network diagram with various sized nodes and connecting lines, set against a teal background.

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Please cite this publication as:

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2020), *Supporting advocacy at school – Every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools*, NSW Department of Education, cese.nsw.gov.au