

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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# Supporting high academic expectations

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

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



## Introduction

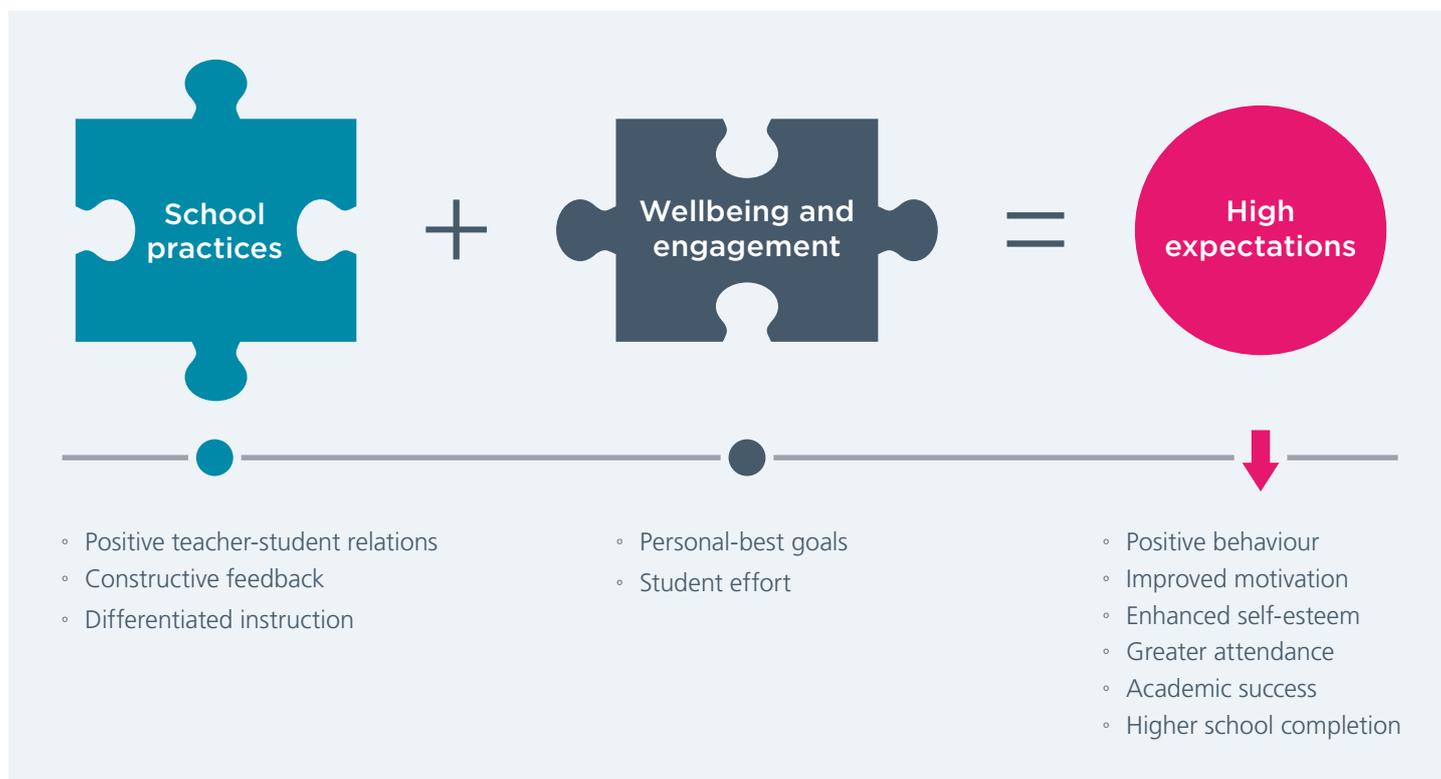
When teachers hold high academic expectations of their students, they tend to know their students well, value them as learners and understand how to progress their learning. This synthesis of research explains why high expectations are important and provides practical suggestions for schools to support their students.

## Key findings

- Students who experience high expectations have improved learning outcomes and are also more likely to have:
  - increased interest and motivation in lessons
  - greater attendance
  - more positive school behaviours
  - a higher likelihood of completing school.
- High academic expectations are linked to both student engagement and wellbeing and can also impact the teaching practices that students experience in the classroom.
- Teachers promote high expectations of their students when they differentiate instruction, provide individualised feedback and engage in frequent, meaningful classroom interactions in order to challenge their students and encourage continuous improvement.
- Schools demonstrate their high expectations of students by using data to inform practices, building a culture of school pride and partnering with the community to indicate pathways for students' success.

### High academic expectations in NSW public schools

Students report on the level of academic expectations they experience in the student survey offered to NSW public schools – Tell Them From Me (TTFM). Tell Them From Me 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 high academic expectations, 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 belonging<sup>1</sup> and advocacy at school<sup>2</sup> and to support school improvement with TTFM<sup>3</sup>.



1 Supporting sense of belonging.  
2 Supporting advocacy at school.  
3 Supporting school improvement.

## What are high academic expectations?

High academic expectations are a measure of students' experiences in the classroom. They are a reflection of the extent to which teachers value academic achievement and hold the expectation that every student can and should work towards their potential.

## Why are high expectations important?

High expectations promote both students' academic achievement and their wellbeing. Research shows that the expectations of teachers, parents and peers affect students' self-esteem, feelings of self-efficacy and their academic motivation. These motivational factors are strongly linked to learning and achievement. Research also suggests that teachers adjust their teaching behaviours in line with the expectations they hold of their students. As students typically adjust their own expectations and behaviours to match those of their teachers, it is essential that teachers model high expectations for all of their students.

## How do we measure high academic expectations?

In NSW, schools are able to examine the extent to which their students are experiencing high expectations in the classroom through data collected in the Tell Them From Me student survey. This survey asks students whether they feel that their teachers value academic achievement and encourage them to work hard and do their best in their schoolwork.

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'My teachers want me to be the best person I can be.  
It inspires me to be better and work harder.'

Year 10 student, Engadine High School

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## What is happening in NSW?

Findings from the Tell Them From Me student survey suggest that students experience different expectations at different stages of their schooling (Figure 1). In primary school, 95% of students report that their teachers have high academic expectations of them. The proportion decreases steadily throughout secondary school, to 70% in Year 10, before picking up again in Years 11 and 12.

Tell Them From Me research also found that it is never too late for students to experience the benefits of high expectations. If a student experiences low expectations in Year 5 but then reports high expectations in Year 6 or 7, they are likely to see a large boost to their learning (the equivalent of up to four months) (Figure 2)<sup>4</sup>.

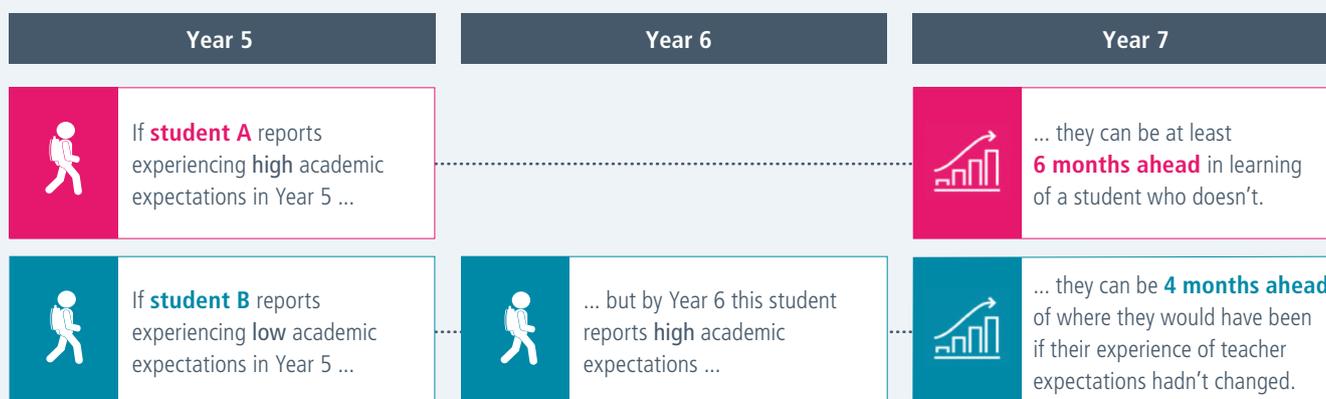
Teacher expectations not only have a direct, positive impact on student learning, they also have benefits for students' engagement at school. Students who experience high expectations from their teachers have increased interest and motivation in lessons, greater attendance and more positive school behaviours (Figure 3)<sup>5</sup>.

High levels of academic challenge, which are reflective of high teacher expectations, also benefit students. Students in senior years of high school are more likely to finish Year 12 if they report experiencing higher levels of challenge in their work<sup>6</sup>.

Figure 1. Proportion of students reporting high expectations for success, 2019



Figure 2.



<sup>4</sup> How high expectations and engagement in primary school drive student learning.

<sup>5</sup> Improving high school engagement, classroom practice and achievement.

<sup>6</sup> Supporting school completion.

## Improving high academic expectations<sup>7</sup>

### Differentiate instruction and encourage personal-best goal-setting

All students need to be continuously challenged to learn new things. This means that teachers may have to provide a variety of learning opportunities to cater for the range of abilities present in their classroom, while maintaining the same high expectations of success for all students. Planning learning opportunities that allow students to achieve challenging goals which are appropriate to their current understandings and abilities ensures that every student is expected to continuously develop. Appropriately differentiated instruction is a powerful mechanism by which teachers can enhance the learning of all their students.

### Provide feedback

Feedback is an important means by which teachers convey and communicate their expectations to their students. Feedback should focus on students' performance on a task, identifying where and why mistakes have been made and emphasising opportunities to learn and improve. Such feedback supports the development of positive feelings of self-efficacy, providing motivation for continued effort and engagement. Feedback is consistently found to be one of the most important classroom factors that can impact students' academic outcomes.

### Engage students in classroom interactions

Teachers' expectations of their students are formed, in part, through classroom interactions. When teachers have frequent interactions with their students, they know their students better, which facilitates more effective feedback and differentiation. Positive classroom interactions, both of a general nature or centred on specific learning activities, help students see that their teachers know them and want them to succeed. These interactions can help foster students' motivation and engagement in lessons, leading to improved academic outcomes.

Figure 3.



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

## How are schools effectively supporting high expectations?

### Developing strong teacher-student relations

CESE conducted four in-depth case studies from low socioeconomic status secondary schools in regional and metropolitan NSW with high levels of student transition to post-school education and training<sup>8</sup>. For **Temora High School**, **Canowindra High School**, **Birrong Girls High School** and **Sir Joseph Banks High School**, strong teacher-student relationships are the key to establishing high academic expectations. Setting high expectations for all students fosters high aspirations and encourages students to work towards those aspirations. Strong teacher-student relationships are particularly important in the years prior to students finishing high school as they lay the foundations for successful post-school transitions.

### Using data to inform practice

Evaluating learning helps to ensure that teachers are aware of where their students are currently and where they need to go next. Feedback from students, parents and teachers also helps schools to refine and adjust initiatives to support student engagement. **Liverpool West Public School**<sup>9</sup> uses data to identify the strengths and challenges in each classroom, allowing teachers to identify when students require further support to achieve their best and ensure that every student is progressing. School leaders are able to identify issues that are common across the school and develop strategies to address them.

The principal at **Blue Haven Primary School**<sup>10</sup> believes that using data is essential to effectively differentiate instruction and meet the needs of all students:

'We've got to continue to adapt, because our kids are getting better by the minute... We've got kids who are a long way behind where they need to be, but we've also got some kids who are a long way ahead. So we need to continue to adapt our expectations of what our kids can do and design our lessons... to make sure that we're catering for those kids.'

Paul McDermott, Principal, Blue Haven Primary School

### Partnering with the community to convey expectations for success

Engaging students in learning opportunities beyond the classroom helps to demonstrate the school's commitment to students' success and the expectation that all students are able to achieve in a range of domains and pursuits. **Warwick Farm Public School**<sup>11</sup> provides a range of academic and non-academic opportunities to their students, including programs focussed on success in the arts and sport, built on

an understanding that different students will be successful at different things. This program has helped to build a culture of high expectations for all students.

**Sir Joseph Banks High School**<sup>12</sup> works hard to instil students with confidence in their own ability and potential so that they understand that no aspiration is beyond their reach, as long as they are willing to work towards realising it. The school achieves this objective by taking students on excursions to post-school destinations and inviting role models to mentor their students.

### Fostering school pride to build a culture which values education

Building a culture of high expectations often starts at the school gate. When the school and classroom environment are appealing and well-maintained, expectations for student behaviour are clear and learning time is valued and prioritised, students value their school, are engaged in learning and are determined to achieve their best. For **Penrith Valley School**<sup>13</sup>, high expectations are central to the school's culture and are reflected across the school in everything from uniform to punctuality, food etiquette and effort levels. The school's rules reflect these expectations and teach students to be responsible for their own actions.

A culture of learning is a priority at **Trangie Central School**<sup>14</sup>. A whole-school approach involving students, parents and the broader community has contributed to improvements in student behaviour, happiness levels and academic results. It has also ensured a shared school vision and consistent messages of high expectations. The deputy principal at Trangie believes that because of this ...

'[...our students are happy and they want to be at school. They love school, and this reflects in their academic results.'

Dimiti Trudgett, Deputy Principal, Trangie Central School



8 Supporting school completion: Resources.

9 How high expectations and engagement in primary school drive student learning.

10 Case studies: Blue Haven Public School.

11 How high expectations and engagement in primary school drive student learning.

12 Supporting school completion: Resources.

13 Case studies: Penrith Valley School.

14 Case studies: Trangie Central School.

## Find out more

For more information on what you can do to support high academic expectations refer to CESE's publications:

### Case studies

These case studies describe strategies used at NSW schools to ensure that their students are known, valued and cared for:

- Blue Haven Public School [www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/blue-haven-public-school-case-study](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/known-valued-cared-for#env)

### How high expectations and engagement in primary school drive student learning

An outline of the research demonstrating the impact of high expectations on academic achievement.

[www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/how-high-expectations-and-engagement-in-primary-school-drive-student-learning](http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/how-high-expectations-and-engagement-in-primary-school-drive-student-learning)

### Improving high school engagement, classroom practices and achievement

This publication shows the impact of high expectations on student engagement, motivation and behaviour in high school.

[www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/improving-high-school-engagement-classroom-practices-and-achievement](http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/improving-high-school-engagement-classroom-practices-and-achievement)

### Revisiting gifted education

A literature review which summarises the gifted education research base. It provides summaries of the research on effective practices in gifted education for schools and teachers.

<https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/revisiting-gifted-education>

### Supporting school completion: The importance of engagement and effective teaching

Research showing the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in promoting school completion, with accompanying resources and strategies for schools.

[www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/supporting-school-completion](http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/supporting-school-completion)

### Supporting student engagement and effective classroom practices in primary school

Case studies on how Liverpool West and Warwick Farm primary schools use high expectations to support their students.

[www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/how-high-expectations-and-engagement-in-primary-school-drive-student-learning](http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/how-high-expectations-and-engagement-in-primary-school-drive-student-learning)

### Trauma-informed practice in schools: an explainer

This explainer briefly summarises the evidence on trauma-informed practice within an educational context, and outlines the importance of high expectations as a component of building resilience.

<https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/trauma-informed-practice-in-schools>

### 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.

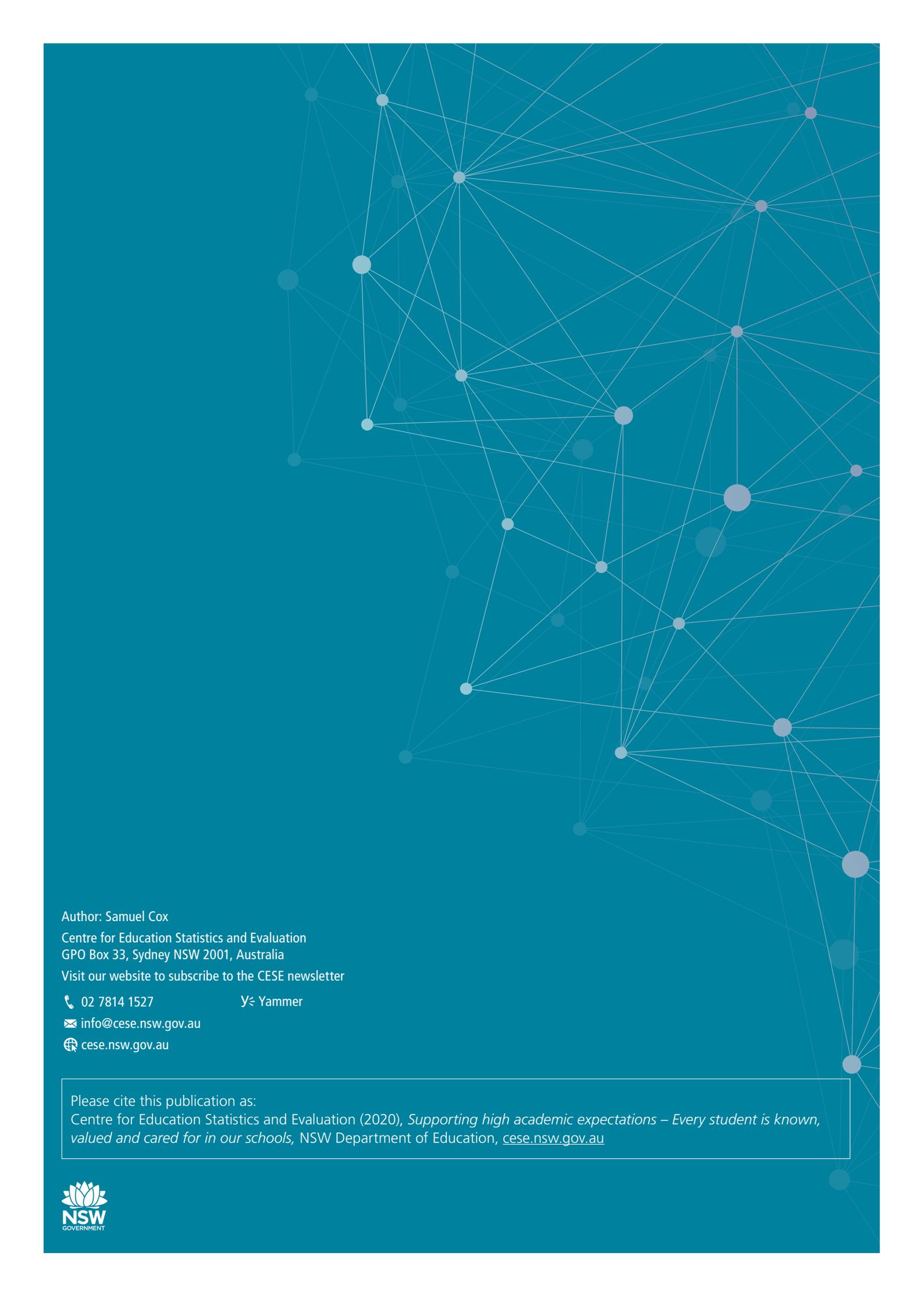
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## Additional resource

### Personalised Learning and Support Signposting Tool

This resource provides information on how to support high expectations for students with learning needs.

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/resources/plasst>

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

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