

# Epping 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).

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 Epping Public School

Epping Public School is a coeducational government primary school located on Darug land for students in Kindergarten to Year 6. As of 2023, Epping Public School has an enrolment of 872 students. 95% of students identify as having a non-English speaking background. The school has a Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI)<sup>1</sup> of -0.98, indicating that it serves a relatively socioeconomically advantaged population.

The school was built over 120 years ago and is proud of its rich heritage site. In 2020 it opened new facilities and learning spaces, featuring flexible learning environments and open classrooms. The staff work collaboratively at Epping Public School to create a culture of positive student learning outcomes, engagement and wellbeing. Whole school priorities include evidence-based practices for literacy, numeracy, assessment, data and high potential and gifted education. Technology is integrated into the curriculum to promote differentiation and engagement. A wide range of extracurricular, sporting and leadership opportunities are available for students.

The school has recently undergone a new build of its campus, with classrooms arranged for an open and flexible learning environment. The area around the school has also undergone rapid population growth, which led to a strong increase in student enrolment numbers over 2020 to 2023. The majority of new families in the area are from culturally diverse, non-English speaking backgrounds. Epping Public School has used their Tell Them From Me (TTFM) data and their own in-house surveys to identify that students' participation in extracurricular and sporting activities was lower compared to other schools. This finding led to an emphasis on creating spaces where students could participate in extracurricular activities without being involved in expensive programs. Within this context, Epping Public School used CESE publications to identify advocacy, inclusion and sense of belonging as focus areas for their students.

Epping Public School was chosen for this research due to its high sense of belonging scores in the TTFM student survey relative to the NSW average. In 2021, sense of belonging at Epping Public School was 4.16% 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 8.06% higher than the NSW average. In 2023, the score was on par with the NSW average.

## Strategies employed by Epping Public School to facilitate sense of belonging

Epping Public School defines belonging as a culture where students feel accepted, valued and cared for by the whole school community. This feeling of acceptance extends not just to students, but to parents and guardians. For Epping Public School, belonging is achieved across the school when parents are also happy to be a part of the school community and are included in opportunities to engage further with their children's learning. The school's principal aims to cultivate an atmosphere where everyone is included as part of the school family. Alongside their TTFM data, the school also tracks the level of belonging felt by students through analysis of data on students' attendance, experiences of bullying, and playground behaviour to ensure a high level of sense of belonging is being maintained among the student cohort.



<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.

There are different ways that Epping Public School maintains a positive sense of belonging for students, especially for girls who historically have experienced a lower sense of belonging compared to boys as reported in the school's data. The strategies discussed include: promoting belonging for girls; advocating for student voice; fostering positive student-teacher relationships; and valuing diversity and community involvement. 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 school contexts and needs.

### 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).



## Promoting belonging for girls

In addition to their high sense of belonging scores overall, Epping Public School has shown particularly high scores for girls in the sampled student cohort (Years 4–6). This result is significant, as historic data from TTFM surveys have shown that girls' sense of belonging has declined relative to boys over time. The school attributes the high sense of belonging of their girls to several strategies aimed specifically at building and strengthening interpersonal relationships.

Staff at Epping Public School model positive interpersonal relationships. This modelling is evident when staff talk to colleagues in a friendly and respectful way in front of students. The principal acknowledges that students pay attention to how school staff speak and interact with one another and realises the importance of staff being aware of this. A sense of belonging between colleagues is demonstrated to students when they can see that positive relationships involve considerate communication and being actively present in conversations. This is further reinforced when teachers speak to students in a similarly warm, professional tone. The goal is for these positive dialogues to be reflected in how students interact respectfully with their peers. Although the formation of supportive friendships is important for both boys and girls, the teachers at Epping Public School feel that such explicit modelling of respectful communication has helped girls to navigate their interpersonal relationships in a positive way, even though this was not a deliberate strategy to promote girls' sense of belonging in particular.

Girls at the school also have positive role models amongst female staff who lead extracurricular activities. The girls' sports teams are led by female classroom teachers as coaches. The school offers several girls' sports activities, such as netball, cricket and soccer with a deliberate effort made to ensure girls have the same opportunities as boys to participate in extracurricular sports of all types, including PSSA (Primary School Sports Association) teams. There is an active effort for all students, including girls, to feel a sense of belonging when participating in any extracurricular activities.

Finally, the school established a playground area exclusively for Stage 3 students, known as the 'nature trail'. This space gives older students a dedicated area to strengthen friendships during recess and lunch. The school has noticed that their female students have particularly enjoyed socialising in this nature setting. After the nature trail was flooded in 2022, the school set up another area called the Kookaburra Corner, open to all students for quiet games. School staff note that Stage 3 girls like to use this area as a space to sit with each other away from the busy playground where they can interact and bond.

The above strategies place relationships as the foundation for a positive sense of belonging. All students, especially girls, are shown positive female role models and characteristics of effective interpersonal relationships.



## Advocating for student voice

Epping Public School wants all students to feel supported, known, valued and cared for. They have several strategies in place to promote student advocacy and engage students to be active participants in the school community.

Teachers have undergone professional learning sessions to elevate their understanding of student advocacy. The informal first step involved classroom teachers noting down the names of all students in their classes, as well as key information about them, such as where they are up to in their learning and who their friends were. Professional learning sessions were then built on this foundation of knowledge about students, led by the wellbeing team. Throughout the school year, the teachers meet to discuss topics related to wellbeing, such as student advocacy and voice, that can be actioned during the term. They also participate in separate professional learning sessions which focus on teacher advocacy. The school attributes this focus on advocacy as helping to build student voice across the school. For example, students have become confident at independently running the Student Representative Councils (SRC) with minimal input from teachers. Currently, Stage 3 students lead SRC sessions by asking younger students about any issues they want to raise and discussing solutions for addressing these problems. These solutions are implemented where possible in collaboration with classroom teachers and executive staff.

Students at Epping Public School are encouraged to have a voice about their learning at the school. Staff support students to ensure their opinions and ideas are heard and thoughtfully actioned. For example, the school changed its playground markings and installed new play equipment based on responses from a student survey. Similarly, student feedback led the school to redesign their awards system (Eppies). They have adopted a new reward system and added Silver and Gold Eppies that allow cumulative recognition that leads to higher awards over a student's time at the school.

The emphasis on advocacy and voice at Epping Public School means students are empowered to see themselves as important members of the school community, where they make a real difference.



## Fostering positive student-teacher relationships

Student advocacy is further promoted through opportunities for students to connect with teachers outside the classroom. One such program is the school's pop-up clubs, which are social clubs held during lunch based on student preference and teacher expertise. Students advocate for the creation of pop-up clubs that align with their interests. One club – the Harry Potter book club – is supervised by teachers but run entirely by students. The pop-up clubs run for a short period of time during the term by classroom teachers, depending on student popularity. They function as welcoming spaces for students to connect with peers and teachers with shared interests.

Within the classroom, students monitor their own learning by using learning intentions and success criteria framework. Teachers give explicit feedback to students and initiate 2-way dialogues about their learning goals. Epping Public School features flexible co-teaching spaces in all classrooms. Throughout the day, each class has either an English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) Teacher or a Learning Support Teacher collaborating with groups of students in the classroom or co-teaching alongside the classroom teacher. This leads to greater access to other staff with whom children may communicate their learning and wellbeing concerns. Having at least two teachers in one classroom also means students see warm and collegial relationships modelled between adults. These daily interactions help students see and feel a positive sense of belonging, as advocated daily by their teachers.

These opportunities for students to build positive relationships with their teachers through their shared interests and discussion of learning progress help ensure that students feel valued and belong at Epping Public School.

## Valuing diversity and community involvement

The predominant cultural backgrounds at Epping Public School are Chinese, Indian, and Korean, with 95% of enrolled students speaking English as an additional language or dialect. The school has embraced its rich cultural diversity for students and their families, fostering their connection to the school community.

Epping Public School believes that when parents and caregivers feel included by the school community as active participants, their children will also experience a sense of belonging. In 2022, the school launched a major initiative known as parent cultural groups. These informal groups were established for families who have recently migrated to Australia so they can form networks with other families from the same cultural group. Currently, there are Chinese, Korean and South Asian parent cultural groups that meet one or two times per term at school. The groups are led by volunteer parents and supported by teachers who can answer questions or discuss where they can find additional support for themselves or their children. The parent cultural groups also organise special lunches and contribute to food stalls at welcome barbeques run by the school's parents and citizens association, providing opportunities for whole-school unity and celebration with food from different cultures.

In addition to the parent cultural groups, all families are included in meaningful school activities such as excursions, special assemblies, reading groups and staffing the school canteen. They are invited to attend parent information evenings on topics that interest them, such as children's cyber safety. At literacy and numeracy workshops for parents, families can learn about practical strategies they can use with their child at home to further their learning. Students can participate in these events with their families, so the event feels easily accessible. These events are designed with the goal of parents and caregivers having close involvement with the school, building a sense of connectedness and belonging that filters down to students.

Epping Public School fosters a sense of belonging for all families new to the school by providing welcome tours for parents and caregivers. They can see students engage in learning on campus while meeting some of the school's staff and asking any questions they might have. The signage around the school (for example, signs directing people to the office; the welcome sign) displays 3 main languages spoken by students (Chinese, Korean and Hindi) in addition to English. Multilingual greetings are encouraged within the school between students and teachers. Families have commented on these inclusive details and how accepted they felt as soon as they were inside the school grounds.

These are active steps Epping Public School has taken to ensure everyone feels represented and included in the fabric of school life. The principal aims to facilitate a culture where all members of the school community feel like they are part of an inclusive family.

## Conclusion

Epping Public School's commitment to nurturing a deep sense of belonging within its school community is at the core of its values. They have overcome multiple challenges to pursue this goal, including catering to the needs of a growing and diverse local population, tapping into the main causes as to why some students felt they did not belong, and the cultural and linguistic differences of students and their families. Despite these challenges, the school was successful in uplifting the sense of belonging of their students by focusing on creating a collaborative and cooperative environment across the school community.

Strategies tailored for girls foster the development of positive interpersonal relationships between peers. Promoting student advocacy and voice ensures all students feel heard, empowering them to make meaningful changes to the school and building positive relationships between students and teachers. Finally, the school is dedicated to celebrating cultural diversity and closely involves families in this process. The school believes that when parents and caregivers feel connected to the school, students are more likely to experience a sense of belonging. These strategies form an inclusive school community at Epping Public School where everyone is celebrated, supported and encouraged to thrive.



### Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

GPO Box 33, Sydney NSW 2001, Australia

✉ [info@cese.nsw.gov.au](mailto:info@cese.nsw.gov.au)

🌐 [education.nsw.gov.au/cese](http://education.nsw.gov.au/cese)

🗨️ [yammer.com/det.nsw.edu.au](https://yammer.com/det.nsw.edu.au)

Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

### Please cite this publication as:

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

