NSW Department of Education

# Girraween High School

## Sense of belonging research series

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

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NSW GOVERNMENT

# 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 Girraween High School

Girraween High School is an academically selective, coeducational government high school located on Darug land in Western Sydney for students in Years 7 to Year 12. The school has a Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI)[1] of 2, indicating that it serves a relatively advantaged population. As of 2023, Girraween High School had an enrolment of 774 students. Generally, 100% of students will undertake tertiary studies after graduation.

As a selective school, Girraween High School enrols students from different communities rather than from one catchment area. Most students are from the north-western suburbs of Sydney, such as The Ponds and Kellyville. Other students are enrolled from further afield northern and western suburbs of greater Sydney.

Girraween High School's vision is underpinned by its commitment to enrich students' social and emotional development. The school developed its Positive Education Model collaboratively with its Student Representative Council. Recently, they have updated the model to emphasise the principles of RAW – Resilience, Achievement, and Wellbeing – out of a desire to build students' mindsets for learning. The school believes that when students demonstrate resilience in their daily lives, they are then able to achieve their goals, maintain a positive sense of wellbeing, and are best set up for learning. The school notes that its students are overwhelmingly academically engaged and are often committed to attending tutoring outside of school hours on top of their studies at school. Recognising the impact a highly academic environment can have on students' wellbeing, the school has made deliberate efforts to offer internal and external wellbeing programs to boost students' resilience and promote students' holistic development in addition to their academic achievement.

The school has been on a consistent journey to improve and maintain student outcomes, including sense of belonging. During the pandemic, the school made deliberate efforts to support student connectedness by offering regular, daily ways for students to maintain communication with their teachers. The staff remain committed to prioritising activities suggested by students to sustain their strong links with the school.

Girraween 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 Girraween High School was 19.5% 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 20.2% higher than the NSW average, and in 2023, 19.6% higher.

### Facilitating sense of belonging in academically selective schools

In New South Wales, academically selective high schools can enrol students from a broad geographic area since they aren't limited to a specific enrolment zone. As a result, students often come from different regions, making it more likely for them to attend high school with peers they haven't met before.

Moving to a new high school where students come from different areas might make it hard to stay in touch with old friends and create new ones outside of school. This change can affect students' social and emotional development. It's important for academically selective schools not only to focus on teaching but also to plan for the wellbeing of students.[2]

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.

2 Foubister L (2017) 'The role of secure peer groups in social and emotional outcomes for adolescents in an academically selective high school setting,' *Journal of Student Engagement: Education Matters*, 7(1):28-48.

## Strategies employed by Girraween High School to facilitate sense of belonging

Girraween High School staff define belonging as students having pride in the school community, with attachment to the school and its values. Students' sense of belonging to Girraween High School is demonstrated when students want to come to school and are happy to be there.

This case study explores multiple ways that Girraween High School has supported and maintained a positive sense of belonging for students. This has included:

- fostering student leadership
- collaborating with students
- facilitating peer and teacher mentorship
- focusing on wellbeing explicitly
- emphasising a collective school culture.

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.

## Fostering student leadership

Student leadership is an important focus at Girraween High School and all students have opportunities to contribute to the school and feel like they belong. Throughout their schooling, students adopt roles and participate in programs that contribute to the school's positive culture as part of the Passport to Excellence program. This program encourages students to demonstrate their sustained, high-level contribution to the school across several domains, including academics, leadership (demonstrating outstanding leadership skills, for example, participating in Student Representatives Council; elected as House Leaders) and service (demonstrating contribution to the school community, for example, acting as a school photographer or a Fundraising Committee member).

These achievements are recognised each year through a Principal's Award program celebrating active participation in the school community, as well as excellence in academic domains. As they complete activities and participate in initiatives, students collect stamps for their Passports to demonstrate their 'all-round' contribution to the school. Most students at Girraween High School will engage with this program, including earning the principal's award in most areas. The Passport to Excellence program reinforces to students that they are an integral part of the school and contribute to its positive culture of excellence and achievement. The program also encourages students' sense of belonging by embedding required activities that foster service and collaboration, creating feelings of shared school and personal pride.

In their final years at Girraween High School, those students demonstrating a long-term commitment to the school through their Passport can apply to become school prefects. The selection of these student leaders is rigorous. The school's executive staff initially select 40 students from the approximately 70-80 applications each year. The selected students then proceed to a panel interview with executive staff and teachers. During the interview, students express their vision for the school and outline why they are worthy of the role. Successful students must then present speeches to the entire school to persuade their peers of their leadership capabilities. The speeches also help other peers aspire to reach for these leadership roles in the future. Over time, executive staff believe that this selection process has increased the credibility and quality of the student leadership cohort. The rigorous, long-term process has also helped create a sense of belonging across the school, as all students can see their contributions to the school and come to value their student leaders.

## Collaborating with students

Close positive relationships and collaborative decision-making between students and staff helps students feel like they are an active part of the school and boosts their sense of belonging. At Girraween High School, students are given opportunities to maintain connection with the staff and the school community, including weekly meetings between teachers and student leaders. The close collaboration between students and staff is especially evident during planning for major events on the school calendar, or when students want to organise an event for the school community.

Spirit Week is an example of student and teacher collaboration coming to fruition. School Spirit Week is an annual whole-school event where the student leadership team (Student Representative Council, House Captains and prefects) collaborate to organise various week-long activities to promote wellbeing and a positive school culture. Activities held during Spirit Week include a sausage sizzle, trivia, spelling bee, a volleyball match between staff and students, and the week culminates in a Multicultural Day. The week acts as an opportunity for prefects to organise events and demonstrate their capacity as leaders. Executive staff at Girraween High School are determined to involve students in the decision-making of the school and provide open dialogue about how and why some requests can or cannot progress. Giving students a voice builds trust between students and teachers, fostering a sense of belonging and ownership for students, especially for large events such as School Spirit Week. Events such as these provide an opportunity for students to develop rapport with staff outside of the traditional classroom setting. School Spirit Week is an important part of Girraween High School's calendar for celebrating the school and creating shared connections between students and staff.

## Facilitating peer and teacher mentoring

Mentoring is a vital part of Girraween High School's efforts to ensure all students feel known, valued, and cared for by their teachers and peers from the very beginning of their high school journey. Belonging is facilitated through formal mentoring opportunities embedded throughout the school's programs and initiatives.

From when they first start at Girraween High School, students are grouped with peers from other year groups as part of a peer mentoring program. This arrangement is also known as vertical mentoring and runs across all year groups. The program allows students to have regular contact with older peers with whom they can ask questions and seek help from. These vertical mentoring sessions are student-led by prefects. This initiative helps build a school community whereby all students support their peers, developing a sense of rapport and support. It also means that older students have opportunities to act as role models and leaders for their younger peers. The vertical mentoring program is part of the school's timetable as a formal activity and creates an environment where students can feel cared for, respected, and valued by their peers.

In addition to peer support through vertical mentoring, Girraween High School has a mentoring program tailored to the needs of its senior students. This involves small group mentoring sessions once a fortnight for approximately 15 minutes, specifically created for Year 12 students and led by teachers. Teachers are given the autonomy to make decisions about the areas of focus for these sessions to best meet the needs and interests of the students in their mentoring group. This autonomy is also important in facilitating the teaching staff's sense of belonging to the school. They are trusted to make decisions in the best interests of their students. Topics covered during these sessions with senior students include exam tips, strategies for effective studying, and the importance of sleep.

Informal peer mentoring opportunities exist even for students who have recently graduated. Alumni from Girraween High School are actively engaged in giving back to the school community by returning to the school to speak on a range of topics, including early entry into university programs and application processes for cadetships. The alumni are particularly focused on mentoring Year 12 students.

## Focusing on wellbeing explicitly

Wellbeing programs specifically targeted to enhance resilience, self-confidence, and coping skills have empowered students at Girraween High School to navigate personal and academic challenges, while developing a stronger connection to the school community. Girraween High School has implemented two significant wellbeing initiatives for their students: the Resilience in Our Teens (RIOT) program, and a school wellbeing program differentiated by each year level.

The RIOT program was developed by Michael Hawton, an Australian psychologist, and focuses on fostering positive mental health within schools. Originally a pilot program run in the Hunter Valley, it has expanded to include three schools in the Western Sydney region including Girraween High School. The program is designed to give students some coping strategies to alleviate anxiety, and to recognise the key differences between feelings of anxiousness and anxiety in the medical sense of the word. This differentiation is important for students to recognise in the school setting; they are encouraged to participate in activities where they may feel uncomfortable (e.g., public speaking) but which they recognise will benefit them in the long term. To prepare for its implementation, seven staff underwent intensive training in RIOT, and all staff at the school undertook a workshop to understand the program's common language and principles. Students then began a series of structured lessons which focused on the psychology of how they can build resilience and cope appropriately with feelings of anxiety, as well as general tips on mental health. There are posters displayed throughout the school reminding students of the key points covered in the RIOT program to manage their anxiety.

The school also prides itself on its targeted wellbeing programs for students in Year 7 to Year 12. Each topic for the wellbeing program is tailored for each year level and covers issues such as healthy body image, social media use, and the importance of proper sleep. A range of guest speakers and themed workshops are allocated for each topic to make the program interactive and engaging. Alumni students are also invited as guest speakers to discuss study tips and their experiences at university, as well as being employed as School Learning Support Officers (SLSO).

Teachers are invested in understanding the needs of their students and act accordingly to ensure positive wellbeing for the whole school. Resources and supports available to students are made explicitly visible and readily accessible. Students understand how to get help, where to go, and what is available to support their wellbeing.

## Emphasising a collective school culture

Executive staff at Girraween High School emphasise that the school thrives on its sense of community. The school recognises the importance of unity and believes that belonging stems from a deep connection to the school's culture and an understanding of its role within the larger community. To foster this sense of belonging, the school's staff promote inclusive initiatives that bring together the entire student body in pursuit of shared objectives. For example, students have opportunities to represent their school as volunteers, helping to facilitate a sense of connectedness with the wider community. Partnerships with the local retirement homes and shelters mean students are provided with ways to make a direct impact on the community and understand how they can make a positive difference in the wider world. Once a year, students also participate in Share the Dignity pact by bringing into school donation items for those in need. Students take pride in their collaborative efforts to represent the school as a cohesive whole.

By engaging in these whole-school initiatives, students can develop a strong sense of unity and purpose, ultimately enhancing their connection to the school and their place within the broader community.

## Conclusion

Girraween High School nurtures a sense of belonging amongst their student cohort through several holistic approaches. Placing an emphasis on empowering student leadership, promoting staff and student collaboration, encouraging teacher and peer mentoring, implementing wellbeing programs and fostering a collective school culture are key factors in cultivating a strong sense connectedness to the school community. By creating a school environment that values cohesion and collective action, Girraween High School has established a culture where every student feels equipped to make a difference at school and in their local community. Empowering student leaders allows them to actively contribute to decision-making processes and shape the school's culture, giving them a sense of ownership and belonging. Consistent opportunities for staff and student collaboration foster positive relationships and creates a supportive network within the school community. Teacher and peer mentoring programs provide valuable guidance and support embedded across all year levels, ensuring that students have trusted mentors to turn to for academic and personal advice throughout their school journey. The implementation of wellbeing programs such as the RIOT program and initiatives specific to each year level contributes to students' sense of belonging by addressing their physical, social, and emotional needs.

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