

# Temora Public School and Temora 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](mailto:info@cese.nsw.gov.au).

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**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

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



## About Temora Public School and Temora High School

**Temora Public School** is a comprehensive government school located in the Riverina on Wiradyiri country for students in Kindergarten to Year 6. The school has a Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI)<sup>1</sup> of 97.2 in 2021, indicating that it serves a socio-economically average community. As of 2023, Temora Public School had an enrolment of 246 students, with 5% of students identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and 4% of students coming from non-English speaking backgrounds. The school currently has 10 mainstream classes.

Temora Public School provides students with a wide range of extracurricular opportunities, including creative arts programs by The Young School of Music and a dance team that performs at regional events. Students are also provided with opportunities to participate in academic initiatives such as the Maths Olympiad. The school partners with Aurora College to support gifted learners through virtual opportunity classes and virtual selective Year 7 classes. Students actively participate in Primary Schools Sport Association (PSSA) sporting competitions, achieving success at the state level individually and as teams.

**Temora High School** is a comprehensive government school for students, also located on Wiradjuri country for students in Year 7 to Year 12. As of 2023, Temora High School has an enrolment of 220 students, with 7% of students identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Similar to Temora Public School, Temora High School has a FOEI of 114.62 in 2021, indicating that the schools serve a relatively socially disadvantaged community.

The school is focused on Aboriginal education and establishing connections with local support groups and Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups. Students connect with learning partners including TAFE, local businesses, and distance education providers. Students represent the school in diverse extracurricular activities including music, dance, and sports at state and regional levels.

The school collaborates with the NSW Department of Communities and Justice for early intervention programs and is supported by a community liaison officer. They utilise funding from the Drought Supplementation Funding to deliver programs, allowing for extra extracurricular visits and engagement of a community engagement officer.

Both schools underwent their own journeys to improve the sense of belonging of their students. Temora Public School decided to include sense of belonging as part of their School Improvement Plan, as they wanted to focus on reconnecting with students and families after periods of learning disruption arising from the pandemic. The school focused on implementing school-wide, collective strategies to support student learning and overcome gaps arising from the pandemic disruptions. This planning for learning was informed by consideration of each student's wellbeing and learning needs. Temora High School sought to enhance its standing within the educational community by working closely with local wellbeing services and families as part of a new direction for the school. Significant shifts in the makeup of the school's leadership team have led to changes at the school, including more structured strategies for student wellbeing. Both schools provide students with opportunities to succeed, and for their achievements to be recognised.

<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.



## Sense of belonging in rural and regional schools

Geographic location can impact on students' sense of belonging at school. Schools in rural and regional areas tend to have smaller class sizes and more time for students to talk with teachers one-on-one compared to schools in metropolitan cities, leading to some positive impact on students related to their academic motivation and perception of teacher support.<sup>2</sup>

## Promoting belonging for students in Temora

Temora Public School and Temora High School were chosen for this research because both schools have sense of belonging scores that are higher than the regional NSW average, despite state trends in Tell Them From Me (TTFM) data indicating that students' sense of belonging scores have been declining across both primary and secondary schools. The two schools are explored in this one case study due to their proximity to each other, in addition to their collaborative ways of enhancing students' sense of belonging. Temora Public School has actively sought to include parents and the local community in practical strategies to enhance students' sense of belonging from Kindergarten through Year 6. Temora High School has collaborated with Temora Public School to ensure a seamless school transition for their students, while fostering a sense of belonging within their school community. Collectively, the schools have applied strategies to elevate and sustain students' sense of belonging across three broad themes: supporting students when they need it most; demonstrating community leadership; and knowing your students.

## Supporting students when they need it most

Temora High School and Temora Public School collaborate to ensure a smooth transition for students between primary and secondary school. They also draw on external providers in the local community to enhance students' sense of belonging and encourage them to feel connectedness both within and outside the school gates.

Both schools are active members of the Temora Community of Schools, which is a collaborative network of schools in the area with an objective of building meaningful relationships between schools within the Temora community. One of the initiatives that Temora High School and Temora Public School have been involved with together is The Resilience Project. This is an external program promoting strategies for good mental health and resilience. In addition to The Resilience Project being implemented in schools, it has been adopted more widely in the community, such as in local sporting clubs, to develop a common language around positive mental health outcomes, and to ensure students have multiple places to ask for help, both within and outside of school grounds.

Temora High School and Temora Public School also collaborate on inter-school initiatives. Twice a term, both schools hold combined executive meetings (along with another local primary school) to encourage dialogue and exchange information about effective student wellbeing programs and transition strategies for primary school students entering secondary education. At Temora High School, the Year 7 advisor has a time allowance to visit the local primary schools, including Temora Public School, to get to know the Year 6 students who will attend the high school the following year. Other collaborative activities that both schools participate in include combined Aboriginal language lessons held by Temora High School and attended by students from Temora Public School every fortnight, and the Drumbeat program which uses music to teach young people about resilience and emotions.

<sup>2</sup> Allen K, Kern ML, Vella-Brodrick D, Hattie J and Waters L (2018) 'What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: A meta-analysis,' *Educational Psychology Review*, 30:1-34, doi:10.1007/s10648-016-9389-8.



In addition to inter-school collaboration, Temora Public School draws upon external community programs to drive students' sense of belonging, especially for students who are experiencing disadvantage. For example, a local member from the Salvation Army was invited to classrooms with her therapy dog to run whole-class sessions on self-esteem and social skills. The Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC) has also worked with a group of boys in Years 5 and 6, acting as mentors to help build the students' resilience and emotional regulation. At the heart of these initiatives, and central to the school's commitment to student wellbeing, is the dedicated Youth and Family Support Officer, who works at the local community centre. The school is responsible for referring students to the Youth and Family Support Officer for extra support. This referral is never framed in a punitive manner. Instead, the school considers the local community centre as "a space for students to be heard" and a positive way to collaboratively form strategies to support students' sense of belonging in the classroom and out in the community.

Temora High School and Temora Public School share a strong collaborative relationship that fosters holistic development of student wellbeing. Evident in both schools is a shared commitment to ensuring students' smooth transition from primary to secondary school, and a valuing of community partnerships to develop comprehensive strategies to promote students' sense of belonging.

## Demonstrating community leadership

As Temora is a regional town with a close community, both Temora High School and Temora Public School act as leaders in the community and are strong advocates and safe spaces for students and families. Both schools work closely with students and their families and act as a central community hub for belonging, support, and authentic connection.

At Temora High School, the staff value the school's role in connecting with the wider community. The school's regional context often means that school staff will see students around the town outside of school hours or when participating in community activities (for example, sports). These encounters give teachers opportunities to engage in casual conversations with students about their interests, facilitating deeper connections and rapport. A classroom teacher at the school suggests that staff go out of their way to have conversations with students about what they did on the weekend, which they believe is an incredibly powerful way of showing students that they are valued and respected. These friendly interactions with teachers ultimately contribute to students feeling safe to be themselves at school.

Temora High School also acts as an advocate for students in their care. They understand the importance of student wellbeing and have a strong focus on supporting students beyond a sole focus on academic skills. The school is not afraid to challenge traditionally held views about education being limited to the teaching of literacy and numeracy, but also requiring consideration of the wellbeing of students. Temora High School is committed to supporting students to feel safe and has introduced initiatives including positive mental health programs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety programs. The executive staff believe that they know what their students need and are committed to sticking to their stated wellbeing aims.

For Temora Public School, their emphasis is on ensuring all families feel welcomed into the school community, especially those who may not have had positive experiences of schooling themselves. The school actively maintains an open line of communication with parents and caregivers through positive interactions that make sure that their families feel that they are heard and are welcomed. The school also takes the initiative to involve parents in school activities as 'experts'. For example, they may run yoga programs with a student's parent as the yoga instructor or use parents as coaches for sports. Parents are always welcome at the school, and the staff have created intentional soft entry points to engage informally with the school, such as these parent-run extracurricular programs, to create positive connections with all families. These active and collaborative partnerships have positioned Temora Public School as a cornerstone of the local community.

Both Temora High School and Temora Public School share commonalities in their approaches to community engagement for students' sense of belonging. Both schools recognise the significance of fostering informal connections with students beyond the classroom, given their regional settings in a tight-knit community. By prioritising community involvement and comprehensive support for students, both schools have established themselves as vital pillars of wellbeing within their local communities.



## Knowing your students

Students at Temora High School and Temora Public School are provided with opportunities to embrace their individual interests and strengths through close connections with staff and provision of extracurricular activities. Students feel supported when they feel known, and their unique interests are embraced and actively encouraged by the school community.

Temora High School promotes close connections between students and staff by intentionally 'pairing up' students with staff that have similar interests, such as their favourite sports or video games. Teachers intentionally engage in discussions to explore ways to link students with staff who share similar interests. Students are also encouraged to find at least one staff member at the school that they feel connected to and can talk to. The objective is to create opportunities for casual and friendly interactions that resonate with students, creating a rapport where students feel they can be themselves. With the community being heavily involved in sports, the school also offers a diverse range of sporting activities and opportunities for students to participate in representative teams. The school offers various formally organised activities during lunch, including arts and crafts, basketball, and gaming. These programs are designed for students to express their creativity, develop teamwork, and enhance social connections with peers over shared hobbies. Overall, the goal of Temora High School is to connect students with teachers, peers, and groups that they feel a sense of affinity with.

At Temora Public School, students have ample opportunities to connect with their interests through the many extracurricular activities offered within the school. In addition to various sports clubs, the school runs clubs catering to many student interests, including debating, chess, band, and dance. These clubs were created by executive staff as strategic approaches to encourage a sense of belonging in each student. The school believes in focusing on the child as a whole, which they recognise as involving meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of each child. The school builds on students' existing interests by acting as a safe space for students to explore new things while feeling valued for their whole selves, not just their academic achievements. Teachers demonstrate a deep knowledge of each child's talents, and a commitment to developing their individual interests. For example, teachers aim to uncover each child's talents, whether this be band, sports, or other interests, what activities students participate in outside of school, and what academic skills and proficiencies they have displayed. They know each child and their families, both within and beyond the school gates. This authentic connection and understanding about students help facilitate a sense of belonging at Temora Public School.

Temora High School and Temora Public School share a common emphasis on fostering meaningful links between students, staff and their interests. The strong sense of community and authentic connections maintained by both schools contribute significantly to the sense of belonging of students in Temora.

## Conclusion

At Temora High School and Temora Public School, the key to fostering a strong sense of belonging for students lies in three core themes. Both schools value knowing their students and provide diverse opportunities for students to connect with their interests through extracurricular activities, clubs, and programs, allowing them to forge meaningful connections with peers and teachers who share similar passions. The schools are seen as the centre of their community, cultivating an inclusive atmosphere for students and their families to feel valued and supported within their school environment. Lastly, both schools have a strong focus on providing focused support when needed, such as when transitioning from primary to high school, and through programs and external collaborations with parents and local organisations. These initiatives deepen students' sense of belonging by easing their integration into the community and expanding the school's support network. Embracing these themes helps create a positive and cohesive environment where students thrive both academically and personally.



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