

The Meadows 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.

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 The Meadows Public School

The Meadows Public School is a coeducational government primary school located on Darug land in Seven Hills for students in Kindergarten to Year 6. As of the start of the 2024 school year, The Meadows Public School has an enrolment of 344 students, with a growing student population over recent years. 9% of students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and 63% of students are from non-English speaking backgrounds. The school has a Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI)¹ of 110, indicating that it serves a relatively socioeconomically disadvantaged population.

The Meadows Public School has an active focus on teacher collaboration. In particular, the school is staffed by a high proportion of early career teachers who are supported through mentoring, coaching, and teacher observation initiatives by the assistant principal, curriculum and instruction as well as the wider staff cohort. The school is also committed to enhancing data-driven practices for teachers at both the stage and individual student levels in reading and numeracy.

The school has had an evolving journey to improve student wellbeing. One of the key catalysts for its focus on students' sense of belonging has been the historical reputation of the school compared to larger schools in the community, which are perceived as being more academically successful. To address this, the principal initiated efforts to lift the school's image and overall brand within the wider community. At times, the momentum to implement strategies to uplift students' sense of belonging has been impacted by staffing changes. So, to best share strategies and build the collective efficacy of school staff, the principal has made a deliberate effort to create a collaborative culture amongst teachers, especially for early career teachers, who are provided with targeted support through mentoring and professional learning.

The Meadows Public School was chosen for this research due to its high sense of belonging scores in the Tell Them From Me (TTFM) student survey relative to the NSW average. In 2021, sense of belonging at The Meadows Public School was 8.6% 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 14.34% higher than the NSW average, and in 2023, 2.3% higher.



Sense of belonging for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds

Research suggests students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds can experience a lower sense of belonging compared to students from high-SES backgrounds. The gap between low- and high-SES students widens significantly during the transition to high school and continues to increase through to Year 9 ([Supporting students' sense of belonging 2020](#)).

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.



Strategies employed by The Meadows Public School

The Meadows Public School staff define belonging as students feeling a sense of pride in the school by taking responsibility for its physical upkeep (e.g., keeping rubbish off the playground area) and demonstrating positive behaviour, especially by older students who model appropriate behaviour around the school for younger students. Belonging is also reflected in the close-knit nature of The Meadows Public School. Staff members aim to know all students by name and consider all students as their own, regardless of whether they are allocated to their class. For The Meadows Public School, a sense of belonging is achieved when students feel connected to the nurturing environment that has been established by staff and the wider school community.

This case study explores multiple ways that The Meadows Public School has supported and maintained a positive sense of belonging for its students, especially from those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. The strategies discussed include: the school acting as a community hub providing wraparound services; promoting cultural inclusivity; and creating a sense of unity through a collective school identity. 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.

Acting as a community hub providing wraparound services

The Meadows Public School has a central role in promoting wellbeing for students enrolled at the school, while collaborating with services that foster wellbeing for the wider local community.

The principal and teachers strive to provide programs suited to the needs of their student population, especially for those students who may be experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage or vulnerability. This is reflected in the principal's commitment to equip all teachers with an understanding of trauma-informed teaching through ongoing professional learning. These targeted programs equip teachers with the necessary skills to implement trauma-informed practice in their classrooms and support students to be prepared to engage at school. The principal emphasises using external expertise to provide professional wraparound services to make sure the school is supporting all students to achieve their best. Other intentional efforts to uplift wellbeing include a breakfast club which is open for all students before the school day. The school strives to provide equal opportunities for all students, supporting students in need to access uniforms, extracurricular activities such as Primary School Sports Association (PSSA) sports, dance group programs, and subsidising excursion fees.



The school builds a sense of community for local families by collaborating closely with its School as Community Centre (SaCC) to deliver programs, such as adult English programs, as well as science and playgroup programs for younger children. The school partners with the SaCC to develop resources, including personalised home readers for preschool children. The Meadows Public School shares its online literacy programs with the community so that when preschool children enter Kindergarten, they are familiar with these resources and are supported to make a confident start to their early learning at school. This collaboration helps facilitate the transition between preschool and Kindergarten, promoting a sense of belonging for preschool children before they officially commence their school journey.

These ongoing programs underscore the importance of The Meadows Public School in supporting students' and their families' sense of belonging, even before they enter the school gates.

Promoting cultural inclusivity

The school prides itself on having a deep knowledge of students and their families, including their cultural backgrounds and individual needs, to participate fully at school. One way this sense of connection is achieved is through staff proactively having informal conversations with families to gain insight into their lives, such as having quick conversations with parents at the school gate about their children's sports on the weekend. Another intentional strategy includes staff talking to students about their interests and cultural backgrounds. For example, if students are interested in rugby league the school will seek opportunities to cater for this in their extracurricular activities. This extends to the recognition of cultural diversity specific to the school population. This has led to the inclusion of cultural celebrations as part of the school's annual activities, including Diwali to recognise the high proportion of Indian students enrolled at the school. Teachers at the school really want to know who their students are, ensuring that students feel known and cared for.

The school's Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO) plays an important role in promoting cultural inclusivity and safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the school. The AEO fosters a welcoming, low-pressure environment for Aboriginal families to visit The Meadows Public School through informal community discussions and coffee sessions. The school has actively incorporated cultural elements into classroom activities, such as weaving and learning about traditional medicines and paintings. Collaborative art projects such as 'welcome steps' painted with local Dharug language, Aboriginal art murals in the playground co-designed by students, and other artworks completed by students to take home have led to a sense of belonging and ownership for the school's Aboriginal students.

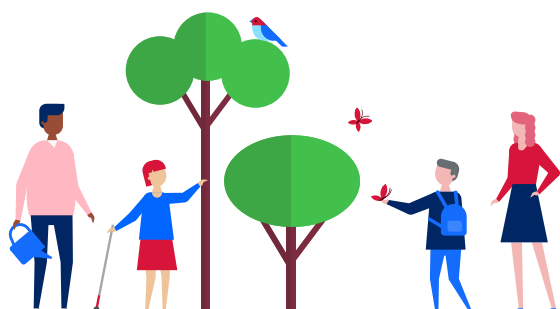
The school has implemented inclusive sports programs for students with physical and intellectual disabilities to create an equitable and inclusive learning environment. These programs have been carefully designed to accommodate the diverse needs and abilities of all students. A key aspect of these programs is the selection of sports activities that are low-pressure and adaptable to different skill levels and physical capabilities. Activities such as bowling and athletics are chosen because they prioritise participation and enjoyment. This inclusive approach allows students to engage in sports confidently, fostering a positive experience and connection to the school.

Creating a sense of unity through a collective school identity

In shaping a sense of belonging for their students, staff at The Meadows Public School have prioritised uplifting the branding and image of the school, contributing to students' greater feeling of connection and pride, and establishing a strong sense of identity for the school and its students. The school has made substantial investments in improving its physical appearance, with significant effort to enhance the school's overall image. The principal has made careful decisions to ensure the school's buildings looks aesthetically pleasing and modern. Noteworthy projects include the refurbishment of the library and revamping of the front office, encompassing renewal of the blinds, carpeting, and paint. Outdoor learning spaces have been improved, including the addition of extensive synthetic grass and soft-fall surface areas of the playground, covered learning areas, shade sails, an Aboriginal Yarning Circle and the creation of new native garden beds. This investment has been made deliberately to build a positive image of the school amongst the community and to foster a sense of pride for students in attending the school.

This investment has extended to the re-design of elements of the school uniform. In particular, the staff have recently collaborated with students to create a new sports uniform and Year 6 shirts. The sports jerseys for the school's rugby league, AFL, soccer and netball teams have been co-designed with students. The updated Year 6 shirts have been carefully considered to include imagery of Aboriginal landmarks, such as the creeks and hills, around the local Seven Hills area, as well as local Aboriginal totems including the possum and owl. The staff note that students now strive to be a part of the sports teams because they can wear these "special jerseys," and that students gain a sense of pride from representing their school. Students and staff from other schools have commented on how good the uniforms look. The same images on the sports jerseys have also been used for the school mural located in the playground to further unite the student cohort and build a sense of collective identity.

The school has also encouraged a sense of unity by establishing a formal peer mentoring program to facilitate positive relationships between younger students transitioning to Kindergarten and students in Years 5 and 6, who are expected to show responsibility and leadership. The program is implemented through a Kindergarten buddy system from the beginning of each school year, where every student in Stage 3 is 'buddied' with a Kindergarten student. Each week, the buddies meet to complete activities such as discussing a Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) focus, introducing them to different areas of the school and its functions, and talking about appropriate playground behaviour. In Term 2, the buddies move on to a peer tutoring system where the older Stage 3 students lead simple writing and reading activities in collaboration with Kindergarten classroom teachers. The Stage 3 students also help Kindergarten students with arts and crafts for Mother's Day stalls and teach them how to play games in preparation for the annual athletics carnival. This initiative is helpful not only for the younger students, but also for the senior students who gradually develop a sense of belonging as a senior member of the school. Staff have noted that the buddy program has lifted Stage 3 students' confidence by providing them with opportunities to lead, especially those students who might not otherwise be the most confident learners.





The school's proactive buddy program promotes a positive and inclusive learning environment. Common behaviour expectations provide clarity and fairness, fostering a consistent and respectful atmosphere throughout the school. Encouragingly, all students are tasked with the responsibility of maintaining the school grounds' tidiness, promoting a sense of ownership and pride in their shared environment. These combined efforts create a cohesive and supportive school community, where students not only learn academically but also develop essential social skills and a deep sense of belonging.

The staff's collaborative approach to proactively building a sense of pride and unity has reinforced students' connection to the school and its physical environment. Students are encouraged to see The Meadows Public School as a place that values them and their wellbeing.

Conclusion

The Meadows Public School has been intentional in facilitating a strong sense of belonging for its students, their families and the wider community. The principal acknowledges the school's relatively small size as significantly contributing to a strong sense of belonging for its members. Both students and teachers have opportunities to know each other deeply, establishing strong networks of support for students and high levels of mutual respect. The school stands as a centre for comprehensive community support, providing wraparound services that extend to services such as early childhood playgroups and adult English learning programs. Through a deep understanding of its student cohort and their families, the school aims to foster inclusivity and diversity. Peer support through a tailored 'buddy' program for Stage 3 and Kindergarten students fosters shared behavioural expectations and unity across the grades. The school also cultivates a collective identity and promotes pride by involving students in creating culturally meaningful uniforms and murals around the school, reinforcing their sense of ownership within the school grounds. These strategies work together to holistically uplift students' sense of belonging and overall community engagement and connection with The Meadows Public School.

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Please cite this publication as:

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

