



Transition to high school – What Works Best in practice

A practical guide for schools to support students' sense of belonging and engagement as they transition to high school

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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Acknowledgements

CESE would like to thank the many students who took the time to participate in the Tell Them From Me student surveys informing this research.

We acknowledge the homelands of all Aboriginal people and pay our respect to Country.

About the resource

This resource is a practical guide for school leaders and teachers on how to support students' transition to and through high school with [What Works Best](#) teaching practices. It supports schools' efforts to deliver [Our Plan for NSW Public Education](#) by ensuring every student is known, valued and care for as they transition to high school. It presents the research findings of 2 new studies from NSW public high schools using [Tell Them From Me data](#), and explains how teaching support starting in primary school can support student motivation and engagement across the transition and through high school.

This resource has been aligned to the following 5 key drivers of What Works Best:

- Advocacy at school increases students' sense of belonging and **wellbeing**.
- Effective **classroom management** creates an environment that minimises disruptions and maximises instruction time by making rules, norms and goals explicit.
- **Explicit teaching** ensures that all students have an opportunity to understand new content.
- **Effective feedback** provides students with relevant, explicit, ongoing, constructive and actionable information that guides their progress.
- **High expectations** encourage and empower all students to strive for excellence, persevere through challenges and take ownership of their learning.

How to use this resource

School leaders and teachers can read, reflect on, discuss and implement principles and strategies highlighted in this practical guide as they support the [School Excellence Framework](#), including learning culture, wellbeing and effective teaching practice, or as part of school-developed [High Impact Professional Learning](#).

School leaders can:

- unpack the guide as part of whole-school professional development and/or stage team meetings
- encourage teachers to share and reflect on classroom implementation
- facilitate discussions with staff about areas for improvement
- [access Tell Them From Me data](#) [Staff only] to support improvement strategies and monitor progress.

Teachers can:

- read the guide and reflect on current practice using the accompanying [reflection guide](#) and the [Enhancing the transition to high school for students webpage](#) [Staff only]
- determine which strategies to implement in the classroom to support high school transitions
- reflect on the impact of implementation.

Contact

✉ Email feedback about this resource to info@cese.nsw.gov.au.

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Alignment to system priorities and/or needs: Our Plan for NSW Public Education; School Excellence Policy

Alignment to School Excellence Framework: Learning domain – learning culture, wellbeing; Teaching domain – effective classroom practice

Alignment to other existing frameworks: What Works Best – wellbeing, classroom management, explicit teaching, effective feedback, high expectations; Wellbeing Framework for Schools

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Introduction

Moving from primary school to high school is a major transition for students: they are now learning new and more complex subjects in a different environment, surrounded by different peers and teachers. How well students cope with this transition can have ongoing implications for their emotional and academic development: poor adjustment to high school has been associated with disengagement and non-completion of school. The transition process is also important because of the impact it may have on engagement and learning in the middle years of secondary school, in particular the 'dip' in engagement that is often seen in these years.









This practical guide presents the research findings of 2 new longitudinal studies that track the Tell Them From Me (TTFM) student survey responses of NSW public school students from primary school across the transition to and into the early years of high school. It explains the importance of a successful transition to high school, and how effective teaching practices can support it and maintain success in high school: high expectations, explicit teaching, effective feedback, classroom management and advocacy at school to support student wellbeing. By improving transition from primary to high school, we improve students' sense of belonging and ensure that every student is known, valued and cared for at school.

This guide provides:

-  an explainer of successful transitions to high school and why they are important
-  data on students' experience of transitions to high school in NSW public schools
-  research findings on drivers of successful transitions to high school.

It is accompanied by a [reflection guide](#) containing practical strategies and illustrations of practice on how to support transition in the classroom.

Key findings

-  Successful transition to high school involves students' social, motivational, behavioural and academic adjustment to the demands of high school.
-  Successful transition is associated with higher levels of engagement and learning in high school and school completion.
-  Around two-thirds of primary school students report feeling good about their upcoming transition to high school. A similar proportion of high school students adjusted well to the new routines, learning and social life in Year 7.
-  Some students have a more difficult experience transitioning and adjusting to high school. Among students from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or from low socioeconomic backgrounds, this proportion is higher.
-  What Works Best (WWB) teaching practices in primary and high school can help support successful transitions: high expectations, explicit teaching, effective feedback, classroom management and advocacy at school to support student wellbeing.
-  These teaching practices in primary school can help set a foundation for successful transitions to high school: typically, student motivation and engagement decreases in early high school, but teaching practices in Year 6 can assist in buffering this decrease.
-  In high school, these teaching practices continue to have a positive effect on student motivation and engagement year on year.
-  These teaching practices also play an increasingly important role in high school as students progress from Year 7 to Year 9.
-  Students in high school would benefit from greater support to develop a sense of belonging to their new school.

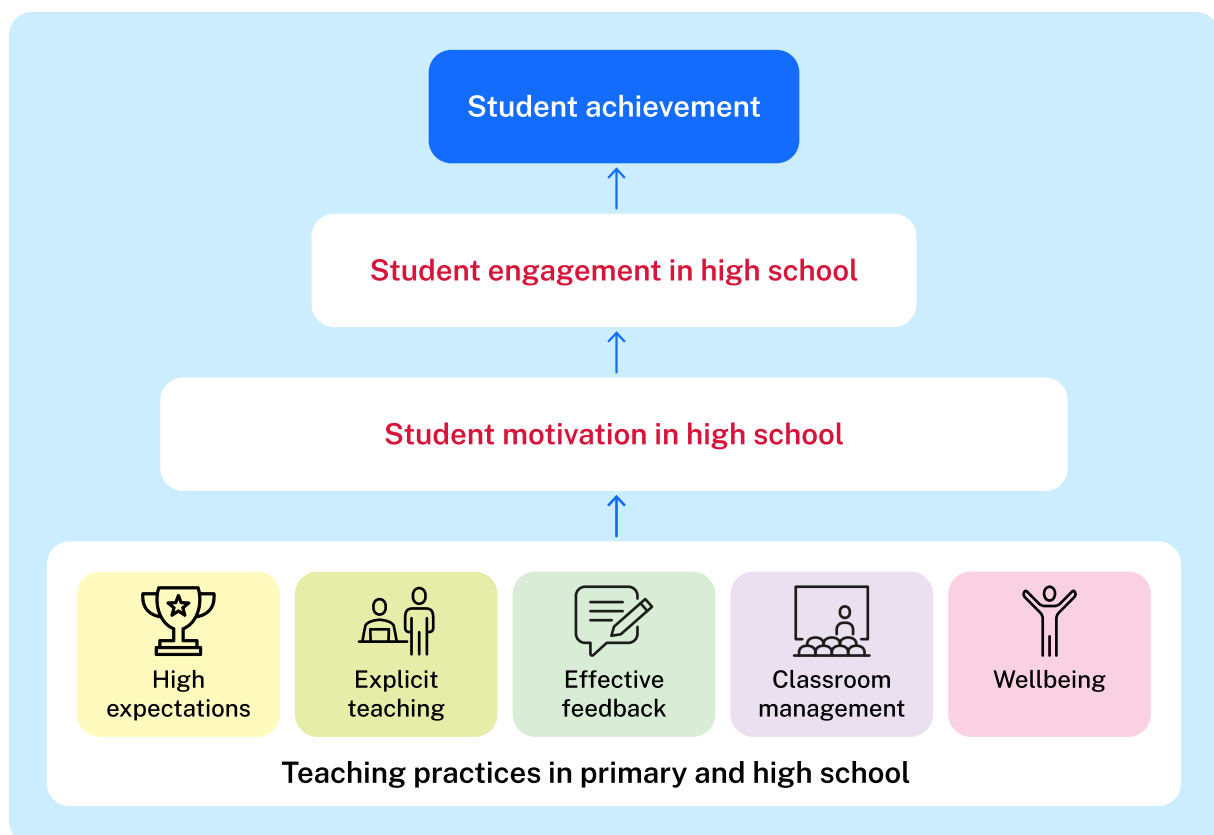
What Works Best and the transition to and through high school

The What Works Best: 2020 update (CESE 2020) outlines 8 quality teaching practices that are known to support student learning outcomes.¹ In this practical guide, we present findings of new studies which highlight how 5 student-centred WWB practices, when occurring in both primary and high school, can help all students successfully transition to and through high school (Figure 1):²

- **High expectations** encourage and empower all students to strive for excellence, persevere through challenges and take ownership of their learning.
- **Explicit teaching** ensures that all students have an opportunity to understand new content.
- **Effective feedback** provides students with relevant, concrete, ongoing, constructive and actionable information that guides their progress.
- Effective **classroom management** creates an environment that minimises disruptions and maximises instruction time by making rules, norms and goals clear.
- Advocacy at school increases students' everyday resilience and **wellbeing**, including their sense of belonging at school.

Figure 1

What Works Best practices and successful transition to and through high school



1 For more information on CESE's What Works Best, refer to [What Works Best: 2020 update](#).

2 The other 3 WWB practices are measured in the TTFM teacher survey: assessment, collaboration and use of data to inform practice.

Why is a successful transition from primary to high school important?

The transition from primary to high school marks a significant change for most students. It usually involves an adjustment to a new, generally larger school, where students go from being the oldest in the school to the youngest. Students in high school have multiple classes with different teachers and classmates, as well as an increase in workload, responsibilities and travel to and from school. There are also significant changes in peer groups. One of the major challenges facing students in their transition is making friends and 'fitting in' at their new school.

The move across school settings and the changes that come with it can have positive and negative effects on students. The transition process requires students to adapt previously learned behaviour patterns to fit with new demands in more challenging environments. Some students rise to the challenges and are excited about the upcoming changes and opportunities. Many students, however, feel anxious in the face of such changes.

How well students cope with the transition to high school can have ongoing implications for their emotional and academic development: poor adjustment to high school has been associated with disengagement and non-completion of school. The transition is also important because of the impact it may have on engagement and learning in the middle years of secondary school, in particular the 'dip' in motivation and engagement that is often seen in these years.

What is a successful transition to high school?

A successful transition to high school is typically characterised by students adjusting well to their new learning environment and feeling confident, competent and connected. They remain motivated to pursue educational goals and actively engaged in their learning process, and they feel a strong sense of belonging to the new school community.

- **Social adjustment:** Students can form new friendships and adapt to a larger or different peer group. They feel a sense of belonging in the new school environment and participate in extracurricular activities.
- **Motivational adjustment:** Students believe that what they learn in high school is useful, interesting and important, and set both short- and long-term academic goals. Students who have high aspirations and are confident that they can achieve them are more likely to be engaged in their learning process and to persist when faced with new and difficult tasks.
- **Behavioural adjustment:** Students show positive behaviour in the classroom and can follow new rules and routines. They exhibit a level of self-discipline and responsibility appropriate for the high school setting.
- **Academic adjustment:** Students can cope with the increased workload and the more complex academic content of high school. They show an understanding of new classroom expectations and can independently manage their studies while maintaining or improving their academic performance.

Data from NSW public schools

What is happening in NSW?

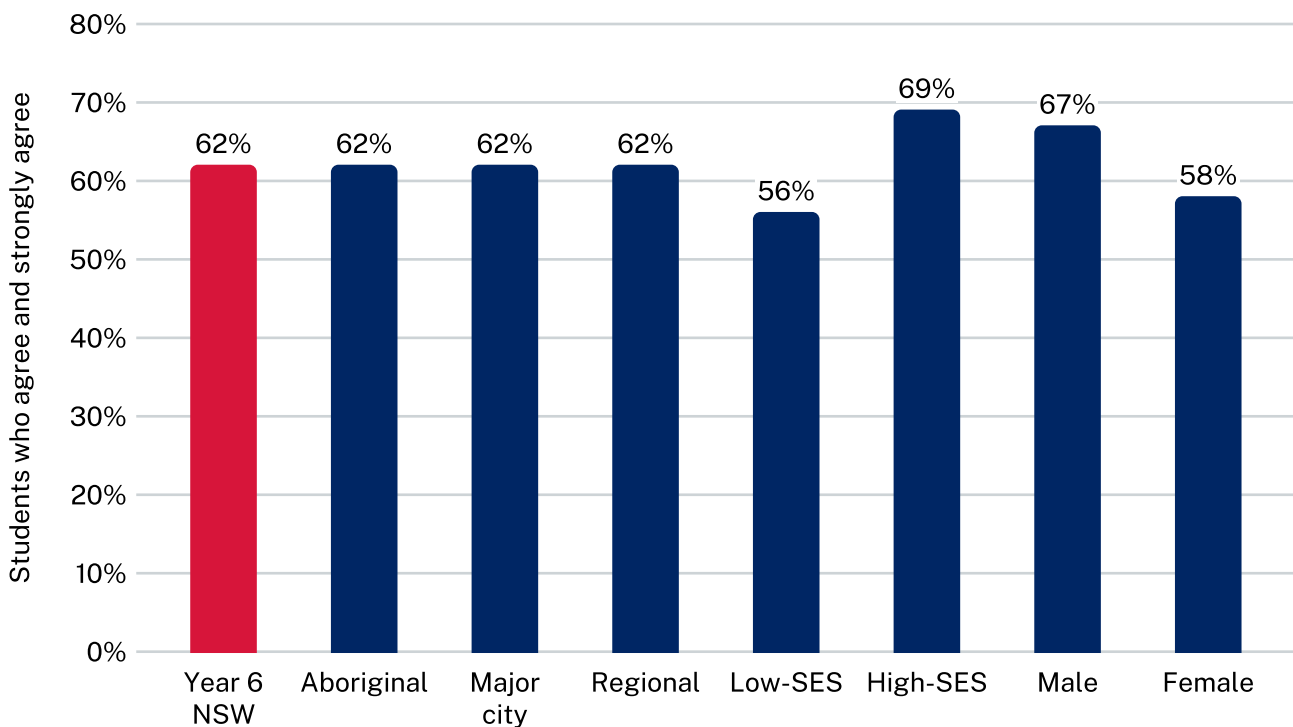
Primary students' expectations about transition to high school

In NSW public schools, on average 62% of students in Year 6 felt good about going to high school (Figure 2).

- Students from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and students from regional or remote locations had a similar outlook on the move to high school as other students.
- Students from a high socioeconomic status (SES) background felt better about the move to high school than their low-SES peers.
- Male students felt better about the upcoming move to high school than female students, with a gap of almost 10 percentage points between them.

Figure 2

Year 6 students in NSW public schools reporting that they feel good about going to high school, TTFM student data, Semester 1, 2023

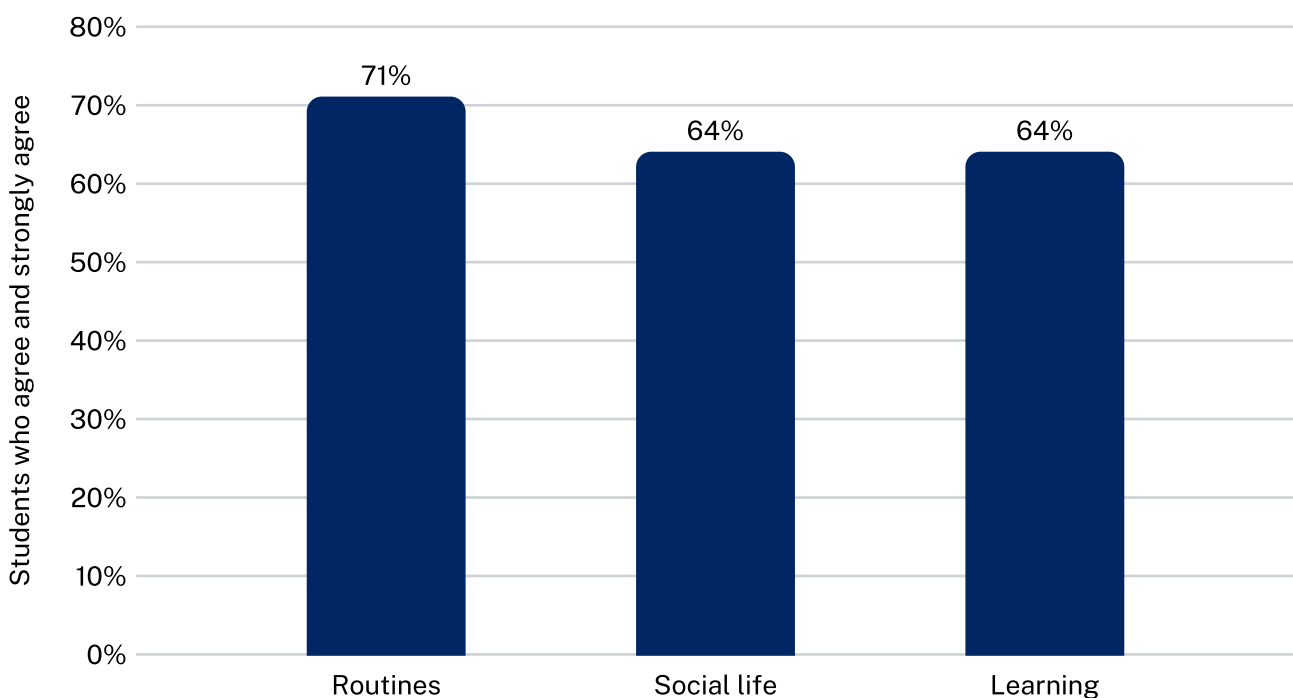


High school students' experiences of their transition to high school

Most students experience the transition positively. On average, 71% of Year 7 students felt that they adjusted well to the new routines of high school. Almost 2 in 3 students felt well adjusted in terms of their learning and social life (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Year 7 students in NSW public schools report feeling well adjusted to high school routines, social life and learning, TTFM student data, Semester 1, 2023



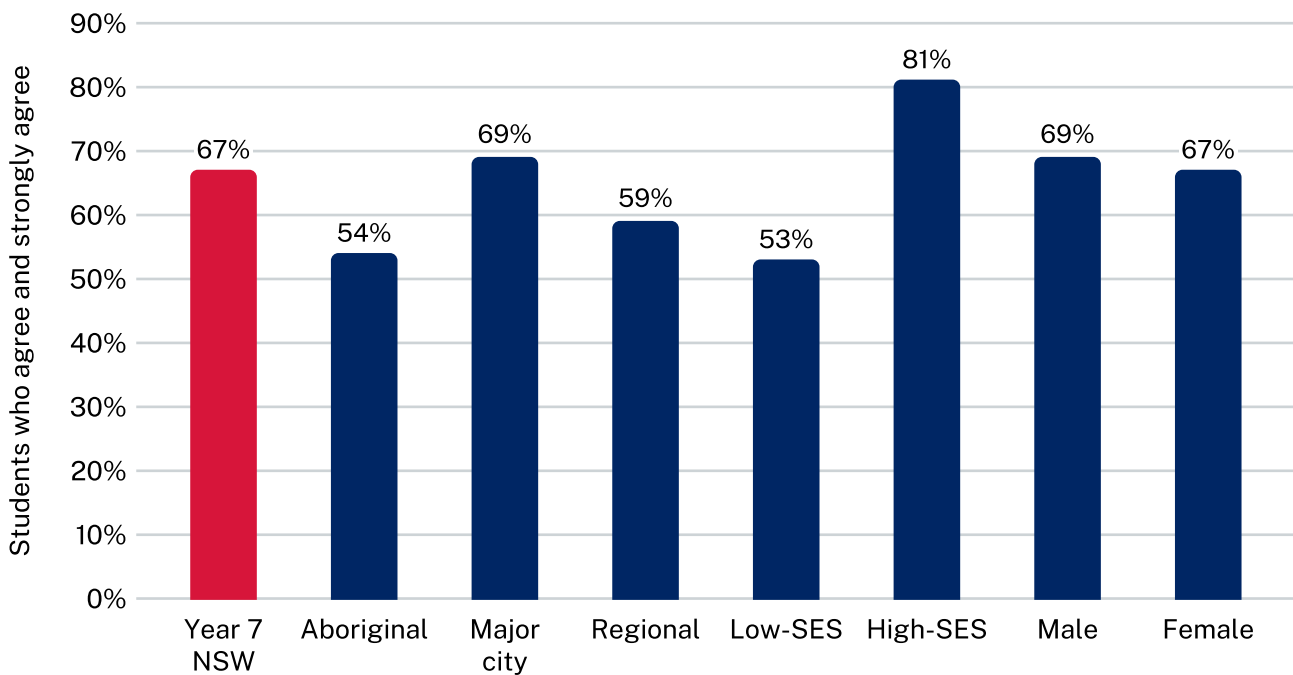
However, some students have a more difficult experience transitioning and adjusting to high school (Figure 4).³

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students did not feel as well adjusted to high school routines, social life and learning as their peers. This is despite similar positive feelings in Year 6 about going to high school.
- Low-SES and regional students did not feel as well adjusted to high school as their peers.
- Female students in Year 7 feel as well adjusted to high school as male students, despite their concerns about the transition in Year 6.

³ Tell Them From Me does not capture responses of all students with disability. Students with disability likely require differentiated or targeted support, covered in the [Enhancing the transition to high school for students webpage](#) [Staff only].

Figure 4

Year 7 students in NSW public schools report feeling well adjusted to high school routines, social life and learning combined, TTFM student data, Semester 1, 2023

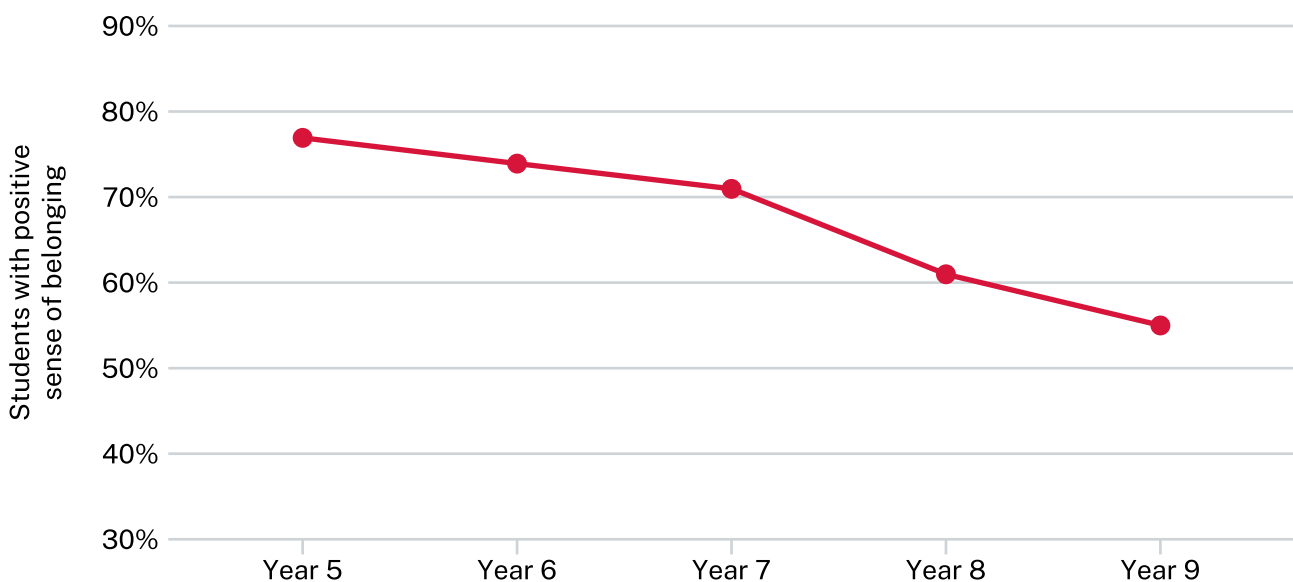


The Year 9 dip

Further into high school, student wellbeing, motivation and engagement tend to decline further in what is widely known as the Year 9 dip. This is also evident in NSW. For example, sense of belonging decreases across the transition from primary to high school and then further until Year 9 (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Sense of belonging in one student cohort across the transition to and through high school, TTFM student data, Semester 1, 2019–2023



In 2023, the Tell Them From Me survey asked both primary and high school students about their learning and engagement at school. Student responses to this survey can tell us:

- how Year 6 students feel about the upcoming transition to high school
- how well adjusted Year 7 students feel to experiences of high school, including the routine, social life and learning
- which areas of transition and which students require more support.

In other years, changes in students' wellbeing, motivation and engagement can provide information on how students are faring across the transition and into high school.

Your school can access data from the student survey to help inform your school's transition planning.

Evidence base

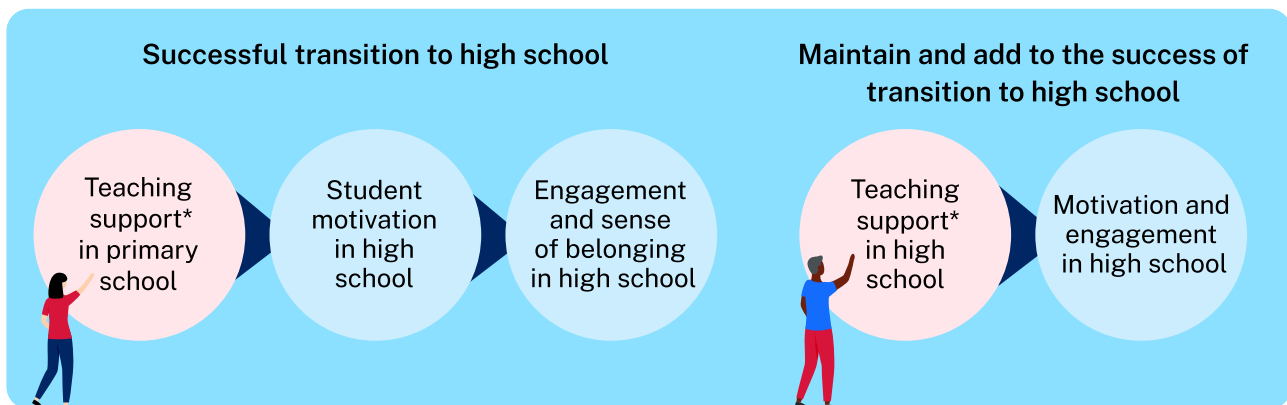
Longitudinal research shows What Works Best teaching practices can support successful transitions to and through high school

Two collaborative studies by CESE and the University of New South Wales (UNSW) examined how to better support students' experience of transition from primary to high school, using TTFM data:

- Study 1 tracked 19,500 NSW public school students from 791 primary schools in Year 6 (2020) to 393 high schools in Year 7 (2021).
- Study 2 tracked 7,800 NSW public school students from 774 primary schools in Year 6 (2018) to 247 high schools in Year 7 (2019) and on to Year 8 (2020) and Year 9 (2021).

Figure 6

How teaching practices in primary school can support successful transitions to high school



* Advocacy at school, expectations for success, classroom management, explicit teaching practices and effective feedback.

The studies examined how well students transitioned to high school and how well they adjusted after their transition to high school. Importantly, the studies show how teaching practices can support student transition and high school adjustment, above and beyond student background and achievement. The studies use responses to a range of TTFM questions provided in primary school and throughout high school, including:

- student sense of belonging at school: whether they made friends and felt accepted and included
- student motivation to achieve short- and long-term education goals: whether they set learning goals, valued school outcomes and aspired to go to university⁴

4 Expectation to attend university is the only student aspiration question asked in both primary and secondary surveys; the secondary survey also includes questions on aspirations to complete high school and aspirations to go on to TAFE. Growth goal setting was not included in Study 2 as the questions had not been asked in 2018.

- student engagement in achieving these goals: their perseverance, homework behaviour and classroom behaviour
- student perceptions of teaching support: advocacy at school, expectations for success, classroom management, explicit teaching practices and effective feedback.⁵

The research found that experiencing these teaching practices in primary school can improve students' engagement in high school. It also found that this effect came from an increase in students' motivation for learning (Figure 6).

Finding 1: WWB teaching practices in primary school can help set a foundation for successful transitions to high school

When students experienced effective teaching practices in Year 6, they were in a more positive starting position for their motivation and engagement before their transition to high school. Students who report effective teaching practices also report higher levels of valuing school outcomes, perseverance and sense of belonging, above and beyond their demographic background and prior motivation, engagement and achievement.

Indeed, teaching support in Year 6 not only positively predicted student motivation and engagement in Year 6, but also in Year 7 following their transition to high school. High school students who had reported teaching support while they were in primary school were more likely to:

- value school outcomes by seeing what they learned at school as directly related to their long-term success
- set growth goals in their learning
- aspire to attend university.

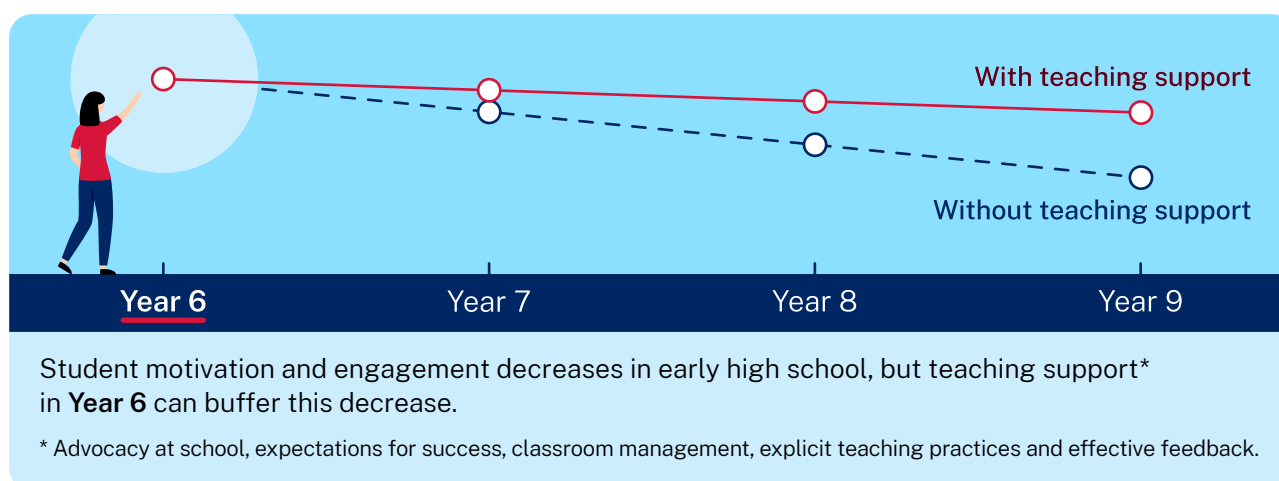
The increased motivation in Year 7 had flow-on effects on students' social and behavioural engagement at school and their achievement: having both short- and long-term goals motivated the students to be more consistent and persistent in their homework and classroom behaviour.

Primary school teaching practices thus have tangible effects across the transition to high school, for students from various backgrounds (Figure 7).

⁵ Explicit teaching practices were measured differently in Study 1 and Study 2 as new questions became available from 2020. The 5 teaching practices are discussed in more detail in [What Works Best – 2020 update](#).

Figure 7

WWB teaching practices in primary school can help set a foundation for successful transitions to high school



Finding 2: In high school, teaching practices continue to have a positive effect

In high school, WWB teaching practices like explicit teaching or high expectations continue to have a positive link to students' motivation and engagement throughout adolescence, in every year of high school. When students report receiving teaching support, they are also more likely to report:

- high aspirations
- valuing of school
- perseverance
- positive homework application
- sense of belonging
- positive classroom behaviour in each year.

For those students who did not report effective teaching practices in primary school, it is not too late to provide teaching support that buffers against declines in motivation and engagement in high school.

Previous CESE research shows the importance of high expectations and explicit teaching, in particular, for students' transition to and through high school:

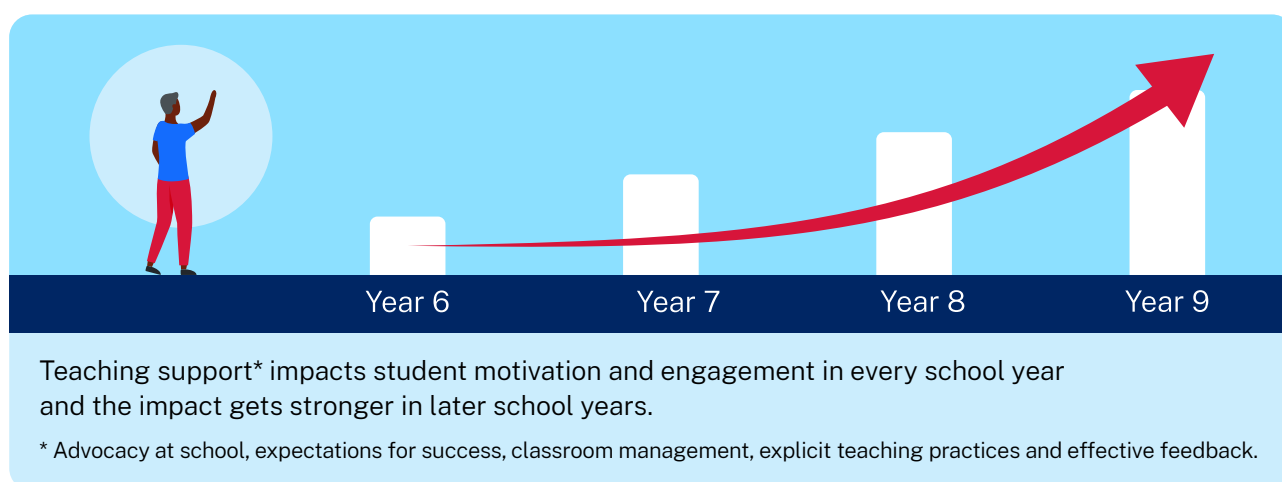
- [Improving high school engagement, classroom practices and achievement \(2017\)](#)
- [How high expectations and engagement in primary school drive student learning \(2019\)](#)
- [Explicit teaching drives student motivation, engagement, and achievement in NSW public schools – a What Works Best research update \(2024\)](#).

Finding 3: Teaching practices play an increasingly important role in high school

Not only are teaching practices positively linked to students' engagement and motivation, research also suggests that they play an increasingly important role as students progress through high school (Figure 8). That is, effective teaching practices yield an increasing buffering effect against the dip over time, as teaching support becomes more important in students' progress through adolescence.

Figure 8

Teaching support plays an increasingly important role in high school



Finding 4: Students in high school would benefit from greater support to develop a sense of belonging to their new school

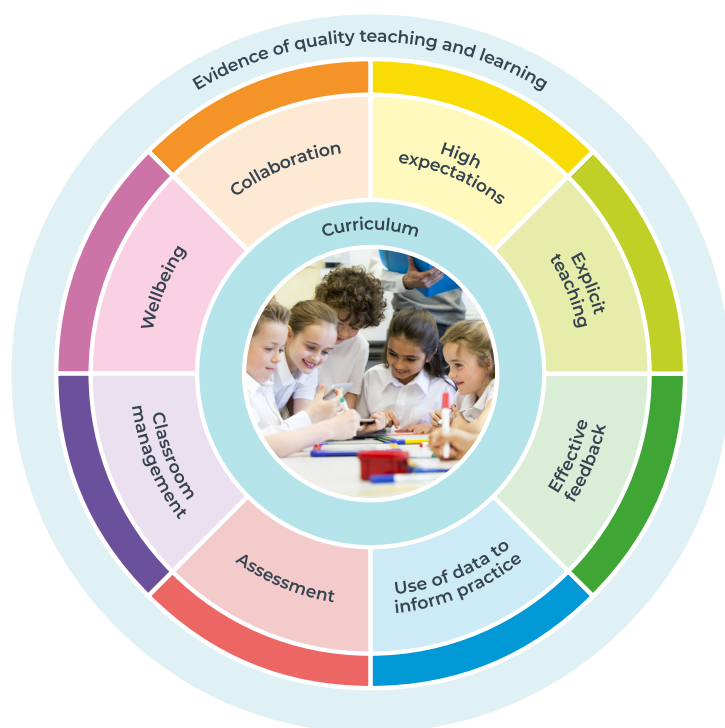
The research also found that effective teaching support in primary school was associated with a decline in sense of belonging in high school. This may reflect that Year 6 teachers were mindful of students in their classroom who struggled socially-emotionally and provided more support, but when students moved to a larger high school with many teachers the need for this support may not have been apparent. In this case, stronger communication between primary and high school on the needs of individual students could support sense of belonging in high school. Further information on how to support students' sense of belonging can be found in the [Sense of belonging research series](#).

What Works Best teaching practices

The research demonstrates that schools can help students transition to high school through 5 What Works Best practices (Figure 9): classroom management, advocacy at school (as part of the student wellbeing theme), relevance and explicit teaching, effective feedback and high expectations. For practical strategies and illustrations of practice on how to support students' transition to and through high school, refer to the accompanying [reflection guide](#).

Figure 9

What Works Best – 8 key themes



For more information on What Works Best, refer to:

- [What Works Best: 2020 update](#)
- [What Works Best in practice](#)

For further resources on how to boost students' sense of belonging and goal setting, see:

- [Supporting students' sense of belonging](#)
- [Sense of belonging research series](#)
- [Growth goal setting – What Works Best in practice](#)

For CESE research on supporting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, see:

- [Supporting Aboriginal students to attain the Higher School Certificate \(HSC\)](#)
- [Understanding attendance](#)

For CESE research on supporting low-SES students, see:

- [Supporting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to flourish](#)

Student experiences of transition from primary to high school in NSW public schools

Students report on various elements of their educational experience in the student survey offered to NSW public schools – Tell Them From Me (TTFM).^{*} TTFM reports on student, parent and teacher perspectives of school life, and provides data on students' wellbeing and engagement, as well as the teaching practices they encounter in the classroom. This practical guide presents findings on how to support students' experience of transition from primary to high school, drawn from longitudinal modelling of TTFM data in 2 collaborative studies by CESE and the University of New South Wales (UNSW). Study 1, tracking students from Year 6 to Year 7, was published in 2024 in the journal *Learning and Individual Differences*. Study 2, tracking students from Year 6 to Year 9, was published in 2024 in the journal *Learning and Instruction*.

^{*} Tell Them From Me is provided by, and is the intellectual property of The Learning Bar.

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