

Understanding regional, rural and remote students' school completion and post-school pathway plans

Research report

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



Introduction

Understanding regional, rural and remote (RRR) students' school completion and post-school pathway intentions is critical for improving educational outcomes and supporting equitable access to future opportunities. Students' intentions can be strong indicators of their eventual pathways, as aspirations translate into actual decisions and achievements. Examining these intentions offers early insight into potential barriers and supports that shape students' educational journeys.

This research report presents the findings of a new study from NSW high schools using Tell Them From Me (TTFM) data, following 9,300 Year 9 students from 161 RRR schools to their school completion. It explains students' most common school completion and post-school pathway intentions, and highlights the need to support students who lack clear intentions in navigating their final school years.

Key findings

- Our research showed that RRR students' educational intentions can fall into 1 of 5 pathway plans, based on a combination of their intentions to complete school, go to university and/or pursue vocational education and training (VET) pathways.
- Of these 5 pathway plans, 3 include high intentions to complete Year 12, which can be a strong indicator for HSC attainment.
- Students on average were uncertain about their intentions towards VET pathways and perceived a less clear connection between completing Year 12 and VET pathways, indicating a need to better inform and prepare students for VET pathways to help clarify post-school intentions.
- Research shows that school completion is strongly associated with better short-term and long-term opportunities, including engagement in further study, participation in the workforce and broader social and economic wellbeing.
- Evidence-informed teaching practices – including student wellbeing support, expectations for success, classroom management, explicit teaching and effective feedback, as identified in What Works Best – can support students' intentions to complete Year 12.

School completion and post-school pathways in NSW public schools

The NSW Department of Education holds rich survey data that captures student, parent and school staff perspectives on school life. Its student survey data provides information on students' engagement, aspirations and wellbeing at school, as well as the teaching practices they experience in the classroom. From 2015 to 2024, students reported on various elements of their school experience in the Tell Them From Me (TTFM) student survey.¹ From 2025, students report these in the new NSW Public Schools Surveys (NPSS) for students. More information is available on the [NSW Public Schools Surveys](#) webpage.

This research report presents findings from both TTFM and NPSS, examining completion intentions and post-school pathways among RRR students.² It draws on insights from 2 longitudinal studies CESE conducted in collaboration with the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and published in the journal *Contemporary Educational Psychology* (Figure 1):

- Study 1, published in 2025, traced a 6-year path from early secondary school experience to later school completion, tracking 9,000 students from Year 7 to 12 (2017 to 2022; Collie et al. 2025). It highlighted the importance of teaching support in early high school years for the development of motivation, completion intentions and school completion outcomes for all students, but especially for students in remote schools. A summary of this study is available on the department website: [What helps students from rural, regional and remote \(RRR\) areas to complete school?](#) (CESE 2025a).
- Study 2, published in 2026, aimed to better understand the different ways students think about school completion and post-school pathways, and how schools can support students to form plans that are linked with higher rates of Year 12 completion (Collie et al. 2026). Using latent profile analysis,³ it examined common pathway plans among 3 cohorts of Year 10 students (2016, 2017 and 2020) – including 9,300 students from regional, rural and remote schools and 31,500 students from metropolitan schools – and linked these to their experiences of teaching support in Year 9 and school completion in Year 12.

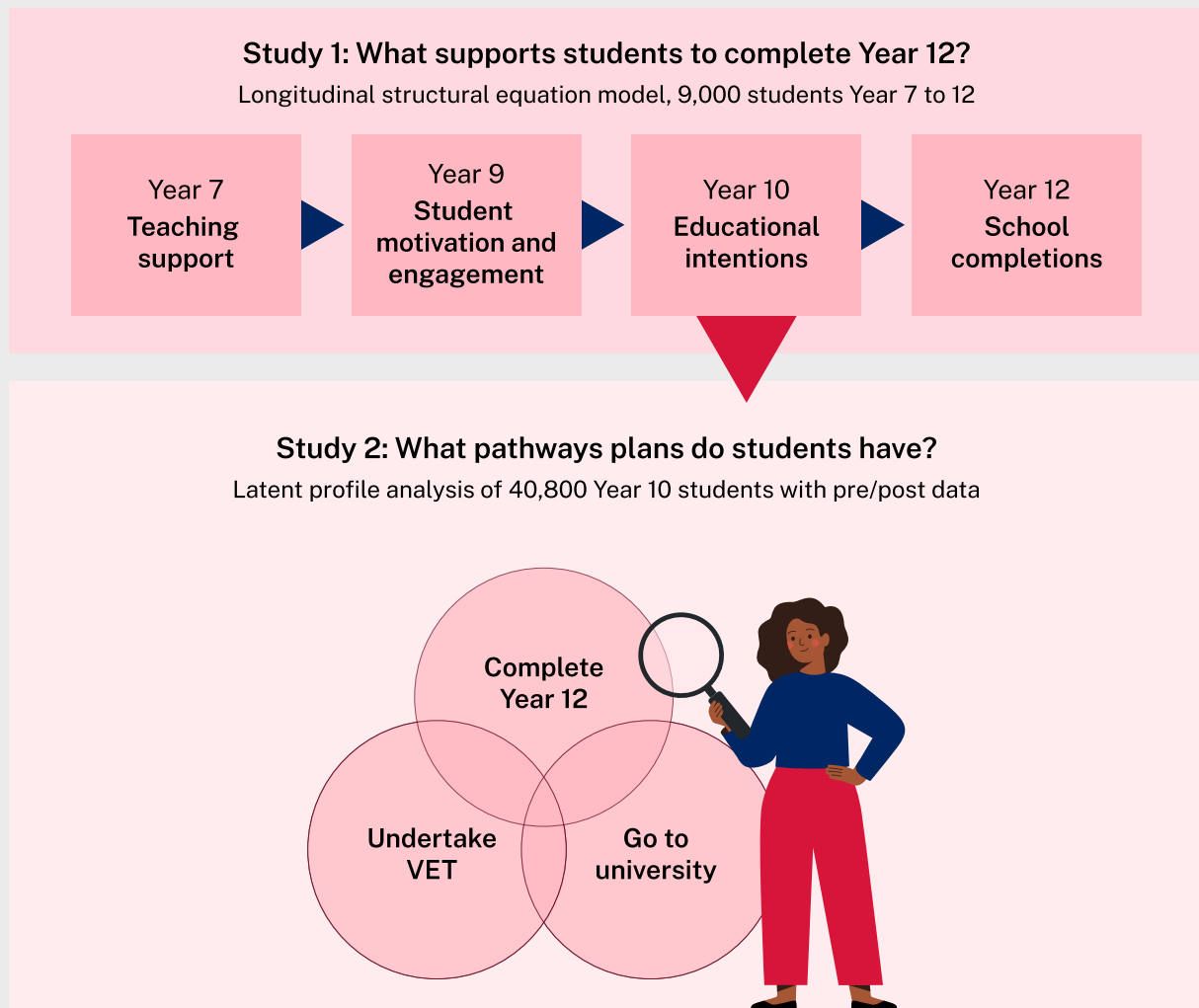
1 Tell Them From Me was provided by, and is the intellectual property of, The Learning Bar.

2 This report uses 'regional, rural and remote' to describe schools located outside major cities. The research article covered students from all areas as defined by the [Australian Statistical Geography Standard Remoteness Structure](#). To reach sufficiently large sample sizes, students from outer regional, remote and very remote areas were grouped together as 'remote'. Students from inner regional areas were referred to as 'regional'. Students from major cities were referred to as 'metropolitan'.

This report focuses on the results of students in the remote and regional categories – refer to 'What about students in metropolitan schools?' for more information. While regional and remote students often face different challenges and opportunities that require tailored policies and supports, their results in this research were very similar and are therefore discussed together. To reflect common usage, these students are collectively referred to as regional, rural and remote students.

3 Latent profile analysis is a statistical method that identifies groups of people who show similar patterns across several characteristics, while also being clearly different from people in other groups.

Figure 1: Research design of 2 longitudinal studies conducted by UNSW and CESE



Together, the 2 studies illustrate both the broad processes that support school completion (in the 2025 study) and the important nuances for students holding different post-school plans (in the 2026 study). This research report adds new, rich insights from NPSS 2025.

Our research showed that RRR students' educational intentions can fall into 1 of 5 pathway plans

CESE and UNSW examined Year 10 student responses from the TTFM survey to identify students' most common school completion and post-school pathway intentions, based on patterns across students' reported intentions to:

- complete Year 12
- go to university, and/or
- undertake a VET pathway such as an apprenticeship, VET or TAFE course.

The research found 5 common pathway plans, held by sizeable proportions of students across the sample (Figure 2):

- **Plan 1: very high intentions for both Year 12 and university.** These students reported very high intentions to complete Year 12 and go to university. They also reported uncertain VET pathway intentions, potentially signalling openness to both university and VET. This was the largest group at 41% of the sample, reflecting that many RRR students had strong aspirations for university.
- **Plan 2: very high intentions for Year 12 and high intentions for VET.** These students reported very high intentions to complete Year 12 and favoured VET pathways (with high intentions) over university studies (with low intentions). They seemed to be fairly certain that they wanted to complete school and pursue VET pathways, and appeared not to be interested in pursuing university studies. This profile accounted for 8% of RRR students.
- **Plan 3: high intentions for Year 12, uncertain about post-school pathways.** These students reported high intentions to complete Year 12, which is slightly lower than the very high completion intentions under Plans 1 and 2. These students appeared to be undecided on whether to choose university or VET pathways after finishing school (with uncertain intentions for both). This profile accounted for 22% of RRR students.
- **Plan 4: uncertain about both Year 12 and post-school pathways.** These students were uncertain as to whether they intended to complete Year 12. They were also on average uncertain about their post-school plans but reported slightly higher intentions towards VET pathways than university (both within the uncertain range). This profile accounted for 17% of RRR students.
- **Plan 5: very low intentions for both Year 12 and university, uncertain about VET.** These students reported very low intentions to complete Year 12 and go to university, but on average had higher intentions towards VET pathways (though these VET intentions were still on average uncertain). These students appeared to have decided that school and university were not for them, but seemed open to VET pathway options. This profile accounted for 12% of RRR students.

Figure 2: Percentage of RRR students with each pathway plan

Plan	Complete Year 12	Go to University	Undertake VET	Percentage of students	
Plan 1	Very high	Very high	Uncertain		41%
Plan 2	Very high	Low	High	8%	
Plan 3	High	Uncertain	Uncertain	22%	
Plan 4	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	17%	
Plan 5	Very low	Very low	Uncertain	12%	

Source: UNSW-CESE analysis based on TTFM survey responses of RRR Year 10 students in Semester 1 2016, 2017 and 2020.

Figure 2 shows that, overall, more than two-thirds of RRR Year 10 students belonged to groups with high or very high intentions to complete Year 12 (Plans 1 to 3, 71%). Around one-third of students were either uncertain about completing school (Plan 4, 17%) or were not planning to complete school (Plan 5, 12%).

What about students in metropolitan schools?

The 2026 study also examined the education intentions of students in metropolitan schools. Although metropolitan students were found to hold 5 similar pathway plans, each of the 5 metropolitan plans included higher intentions towards university than the regional and remote plans. These differences make it more difficult to compare the plans across locations. A thorough explanation of the metropolitan results can be found in the full journal article (Collie et al. 2026).

This research report focuses on the experiences of RRR students, to capture and address reported barriers and opportunities in schooling and outcomes (refer to, for example, Regional, Rural and Remote and Unique Settings Directorate 2025). That said, the findings in this report are also broadly applicable to metropolitan schools, as the 2025 and 2026 studies did find many similar results across regions. This includes the value of evidence-informed teaching practices like those identified in [What Works Best](#) for supporting students' school completion intentions and HSC attainment in all locations.

For previous CESE research on supporting school completion across locations, refer to:

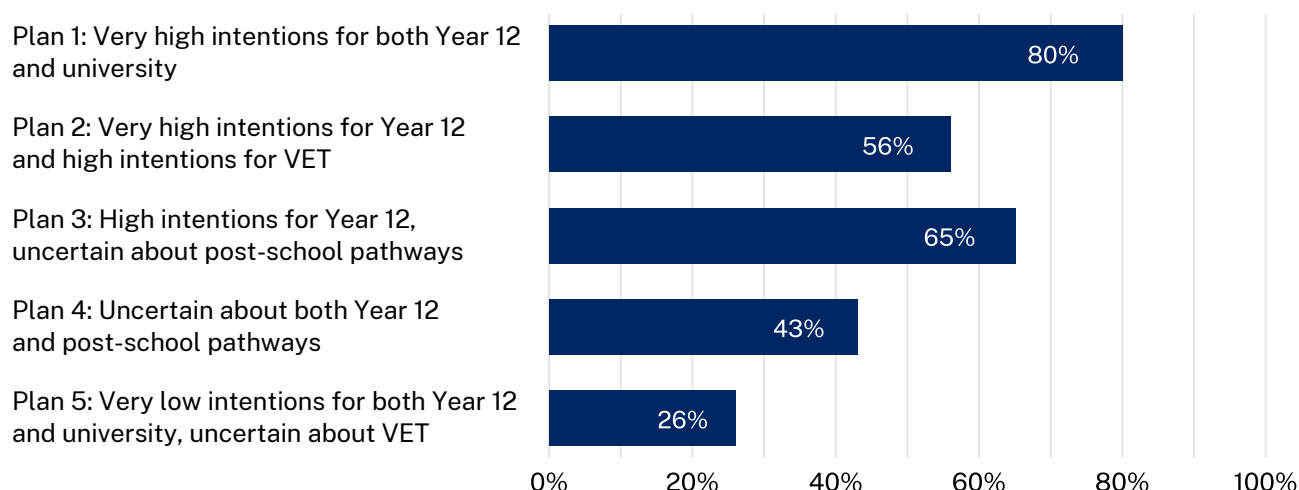
- [Supporting school completion: the importance of engagement and effective teaching](#)
- [Supporting Aboriginal students to attain the HSC.](#)

Plans to complete school are a good indicator of HSC attainment

Earlier CESE–UNSW research, published in 2025, showed that Year 10 students' intentions to complete Year 12 predicted their actual HSC completion 2 years later (CESE 2025a; Collie et al. 2025). For RRR students, their intentions were stronger predictors of school completion than their academic skills. The 2026 study expanded on this work by investigating the extent to which each of the 5 pathway plans predicted HSC completion.⁴

The 2026 study results showed that Year 10 students who intended to complete Year 12 (those holding Plans 1, 2 or 3) were considerably more likely to obtain an HSC 2 years later than those who were uncertain or did not intend to complete Year 12 (Figure 3). This suggests that, regardless of a student's post-school goals – whether they are certain or uncertain about pursuing university or VET pathways – their school completion intentions are key to their actual HSC attainment.

Figure 3: HSC attainment by pathway plan



Source: UNSW–CESE analysis based on TTFM survey responses of RRR Year 10 students in Semester 1 2016, 2017 and 2020, and their HSC completion 2 years later.

Figure 3 shows that fewer than half of the RRR students who fell into Plan 4 ('Uncertain about both Year 12 and post-school pathways') attained an HSC. For Plan 5 ('Very low intentions for both Year 12 and university, uncertain about VET'), this dropped to around one-quarter of students. On the one hand, this shows that many students completed Year 12 despite their reported lack of intentions to do so in Year 10. In a later section, this report shows how evidence-informed teaching practices such as those identified in [What Works Best](#) can help raise completion intentions – and, therefore, completion rates – to support these students.

⁴ Both studies tracked on-time HSC attainment as students obtaining their HSC certificate within the standard schooling timeframe 2 years after completing Year 10. The studies could not take into account whether students attained their HSC in later years.

On the other hand, many students with Plans 4 and 5 appeared not to have clear post-school plans, based on their uncertain university and VET responses. Students with Plans 4 and 5 may be at risk of leaving school early without a clear goal. Schools may seek to identify students who are not intending to complete Year 12 and better support them to make post-school plans.

Insights from NPSS 2025

Why students may not want to complete Year 12

NPSS results show that among RRR Year 10 students who reported not intending to complete Year 12, the majority indicated they planned to attend TAFE (51%) and/or do an apprenticeship or traineeship to train for a job (57%).

However, 36% of these students also reported perceiving schoolwork to be irrelevant to their future study or work goals, and 39% reported that they thought they would learn better somewhere else.⁵ Based on these results, schools may wish to provide additional supports to students with VET pathway intentions to help make their school experiences more relevant to their post-school goals.

⁵ Students could select multiple responses.



Educational Pathways Program supporting RRR student outcomes

The Educational Pathways Program (EPP) operates in 76 RRR schools, including all 18 Connected Communities schools with secondary enrolments, supporting up to 21,000 students. The EPP provides equitable access to opportunities for diverse students and promotes vocational pathways alongside traditional university routes.

The program has increased post-school outcomes. As of April 2026, the EPP supports 695 school-based apprenticeships and traineeships (SBATs) in RRR schools, representing 40% of the program's SBAT students. This is a significant achievement given the additional challenges of securing suitable employers and training in more remote communities. The program addresses delivery challenges by providing reduced staffing-to-school ratios, transport assistance and more onsite delivery to reduce barriers common in more remote locations.

The EPP provides a head teacher careers and SBAT engagement officer to support careers advisers and school leaders, students, parents and employers to find and secure career education and placement opportunities. It also runs Back in the Game, a program that supports students to re-engage with education, move into vocational training or find employment.

Lifting Year 12 completion rates through participation in programs such as SBATs is a key component of reducing the number of students who are not in employment, education or training (NEET), supporting the department's commitment to equitable career outcomes for students in RRR areas.



Why school completion is important

A strong evidence base from research on education and life outcomes shows that finishing secondary education is strongly associated with better short-term and long-term opportunities, including engagement in further study, participation in the workforce and broader social and economic wellbeing (Lamb et al. 2020; Lyche 2010).

Attainment of Year 12 is not only about gaining a formal qualification – it is about ensuring that students finish school ready to engage as responsible citizens and to succeed in university, training or work (NSW Department of Education 2023). It reflects the development of the knowledge, skills and competencies needed for lifelong learning and active participation in the community, particularly in a context where workforce demands are evolving and most new jobs require post-secondary qualifications (NSW Department of Education 2024).

The NSW Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey (CESE 2026) highlights clear short-term differences between students who complete Year 12 and those who leave school early: in 2024, 92% of Year 12 completers were in education, training or employment in the year after leaving school, compared with 83% of early school leavers.

Looking longer term, that gap grows. Australian census data shows that completing Year 12 (or equivalent) by around age 19 is associated with substantially stronger employment outcomes 10 years later: 85% of Year 12 completers are in full-time or part-time employment at age 29, compared to 64% of early school leavers (Lamb et al. 2020). Pathways Outcomes for Learners data (CESE 2025b) shows that in adulthood, early school leavers are also more likely to earn below minimum wage (22% compared to 16% of all students) and to receive income support (14% compared to 10% of all students).

RRR students tend to be uncertain about VET pathways and to perceive a less clear connection between completing Year 12 and VET pathways

Only 1 of the 5 pathway plans identified in the 2026 study included high intentions towards VET and school completion coupled with low intentions for university studies. Students in this plan category seemed to have a fairly clear VET pathway in mind. This plan category was the smallest, representing only 8% of students – for RRR as well as metropolitan students. In contrast, students in the other 4 plan categories were on average uncertain about, but potentially open to, VET pathways. Together, this indicates that many students may benefit from better information about and exposure to VET pathways to help clarify post-school intentions.

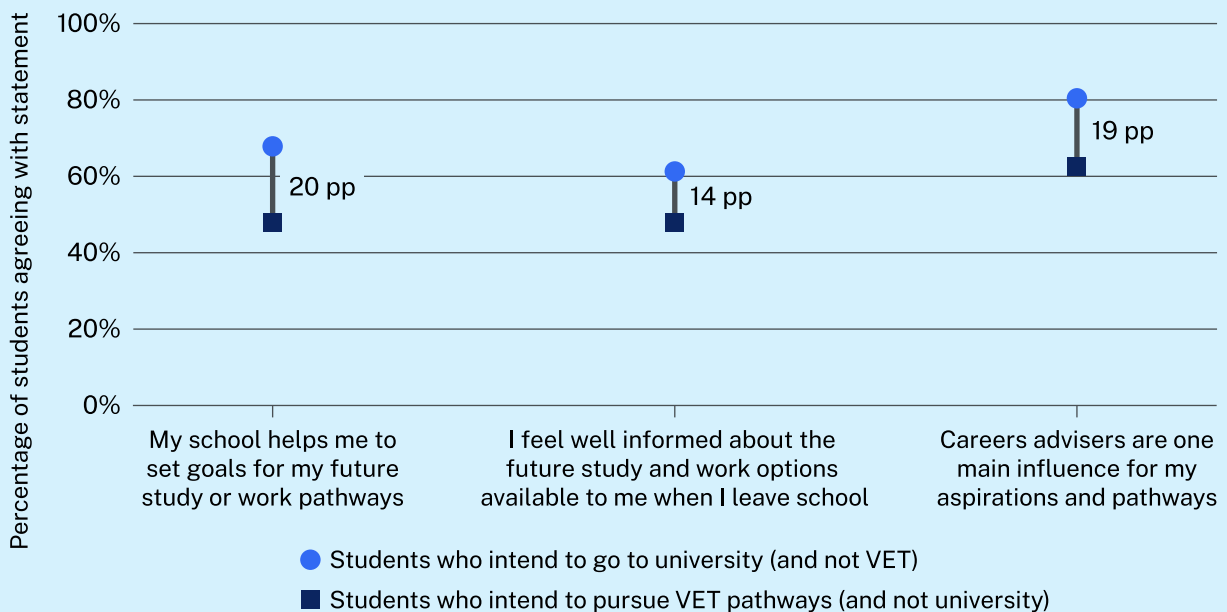
Overall, students were more certain about both their Year 12 and university intentions. There was also more alignment between students' Year 12 and university intentions, whether those intentions were positive (like Plan 1 students) or negative (like Plan 5 students). Together, this suggests that many students see a connection between completing Year 12 and going to university, but fewer students appear to see a connection between completing Year 12 and VET pathways.

Insights from NPSS 2025

School support for post-school goals differs

The need to better inform RRR students about VET pathway options is also reflected in the 2025 NPSS data. As shown in Figure 4, Year 10 students intending to pursue VET pathways (dark blue squares) were less likely than students intending to go to university (lighter blue circles) to report receiving school support for their post-school goals, to indicate feeling well informed about their options and to list careers advisers as a main influence for their aspirations and pathways.

Figure 4: Gap in perceived school support for post-school pathways among Year 10 RRR students who intend to go to university (and not VET) and who intend to pursue VET pathways (and not university)



Note: percentage points (PP).

Source: NPSS responses of Year 10 students in RRR schools, 2025.

The Rural and Remote K–12 Career Education Initiative supports schools to embed career education into their curriculum

Designed specifically for regional, rural and remote communities, the initiative provides financial support and curriculum assistance to schools to assist them to:

- develop innovative and creative career education processes that will strengthen the smooth transition from primary to secondary school
- raise student expectations and pathways into further study and/or training
- provide teachers with targeted professional learning
- establish strong relationships with the community.

As part of the initiative, participating schools engage in customised professional learning designed to equip careers advisers with the skills, knowledge and connections they need to address the unique challenges their schools face. Tailored to rural, remote and regional contexts, the professional learning actively involves local industries, councils and communities and aims to build long-term systems and networks to support career education.

More information about the [Rural and Remote K–12 Career Education Initiative](#) is available on the department website.



Evidence-informed teaching practices can support RRR students' intentions to complete Year 12

Both the 2025 and 2026 studies examined whether evidence-informed teaching practices can make a difference to students' completion intentions and pathway plans, above and beyond their demographic background and prior achievement. The following practices were included in the studies, as they align with those identified in [What Works Best](#):

- student wellbeing support
- high expectations
- explicit teaching
- classroom management
- effective feedback.

The 2025 study showed that students who received these practices in Year 7 were more likely to intend to complete school in Year 10, and to complete school 2 years later. This suggests that supportive teaching early in high school can strengthen students' commitment to completing school, which may be especially important for students who are uncertain about what they want to do after school.

The 2026 study further examined this area. Students with Plans 3 and 4 were uncertain about their post-school goals. The main difference between these plans was students' intentions to complete school. The analysis showed that students were considerably more likely to report wanting to complete school (Plan 3) if they also reported experiencing What Works Best practices in Year 9 (Figure 5).

Previous CESE research also showed that teaching support throughout high school is critical for school completion. Teaching support – particularly high expectations in a safe, inclusive learning environment – affects school completion via its positive impact on student motivation, engagement and aspirations (CESE 2019, 2021).

Figure 5: Likelihood of RRR students having Plan 3 (with high Year 12 intentions) or Plan 4 (with uncertain Year 12 intentions) based on receiving or not receiving What Works Best practices, including student wellbeing support, high expectations, explicit teaching, classroom management and effective feedback



Source: UNSW-CESE analysis based on TTFM survey responses of RRR students in Semester 1 2016, 2017 and 2020.

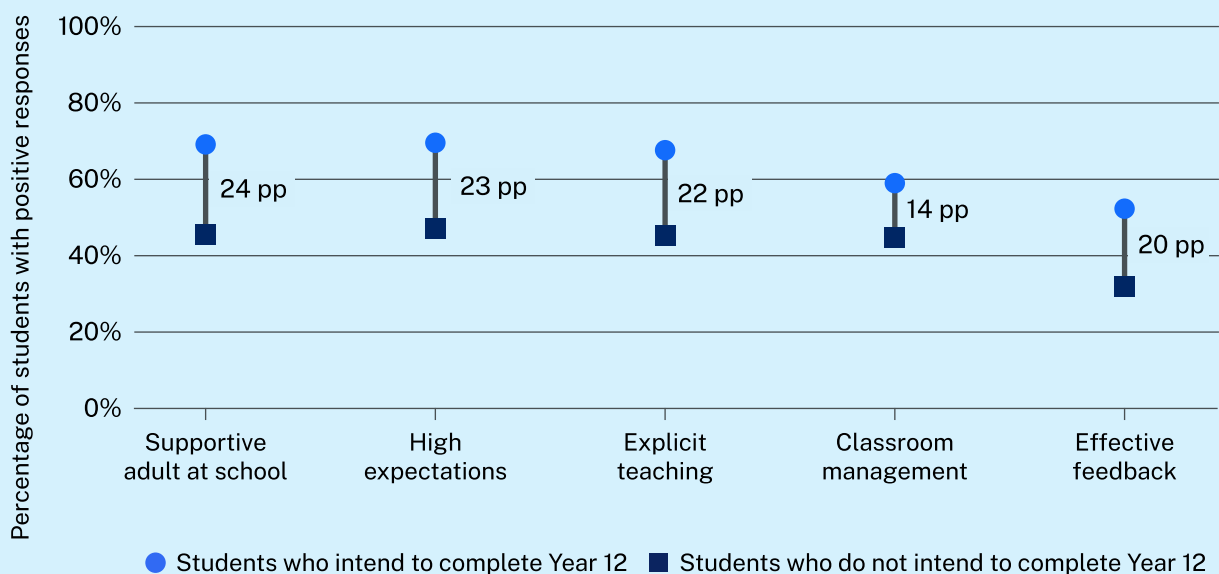
Insights from NPSS 2025

School completion intentions differ by experience of What Works Best practices

The 2025 NPSS data also shows the importance of What Works Best practices, including experiencing high expectations, explicit teaching, effective feedback, classroom management and having a supportive adult at school. Figure 6 shows that in RRR schools, Year 10 students who did not intend to complete Year 12 (dark blue squares) were considerably less likely to report receiving these supportive teaching practices than students intending to complete Year 12 (lighter blue circles).

Schools can regularly check in with students on their school completion intentions, as well as students' perceptions of the What Works Best practices, using NPSS.

Figure 6: Gap in perceived teaching practices and supports among Year 10 RRR students who intend and who do not intend to complete Year 12



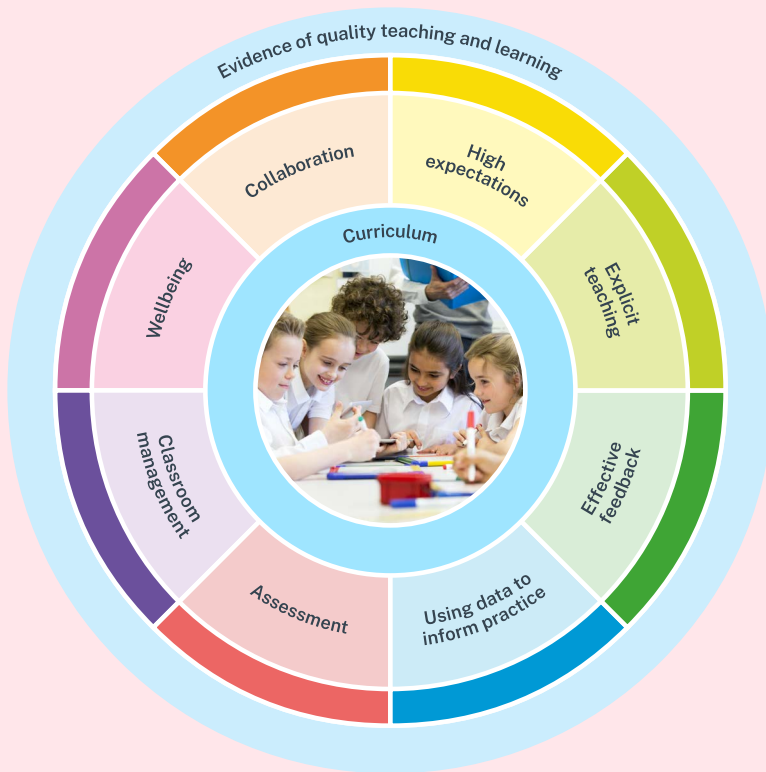
Note: percentage points (PP).

Source: NPSS responses of Year 10 students in RRR schools, 2025.

What Works Best practices

This research demonstrates that schools can help students to complete high school and take up meaningful post-school pathways through 5 What Works Best practices (Figure 7): student wellbeing support, high expectations, explicit teaching, effective feedback and classroom management.

Figure 7: What Works Best themes



For more information on What Works Best, refer to:

- [What Works Best 2025 – Evidence guide for excellent schools](#)
- [What Works Best 2025 – Practical guides](#)
- [What Works Best 2025 – Illustrations of practice](#)

For further resources on how to boost students' goal setting and goal striving, see:

- [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](#)

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