



Chapter 1

High expectations

Key points

- Students who experience high expectations at school are more likely to have improved learning outcomes, increased interest and motivation in lessons, better attendance and more positive school behaviours.
- Teacher expectations impact the relationships, teaching practices and learning opportunities that students experience in the classroom.
- High expectations are linked with significant learning gains even after accounting for students' prior achievement.
- Teachers convey high expectations to students when they provide learning activities that are challenging and achievable, with scaffolding that helps students to stretch their learning and reach their goals.
- A culture of high expectations is built through supportive, culturally inclusive learning environments with effective learning time and positive teacher–student relationships, in which all students are supported to achieve ambitious learning goals.

What are high expectations?

Students are more likely to succeed in their learning when their teachers expect and support them to succeed. Having high expectations means believing that all students can and should work towards achieving ambitious learning goals, conveying this belief to them and using effective teaching practices that support students to achieve their learning goals. As a teaching practice, high expectations describe both a mindset and the ways in which teachers act on that mindset to support student learning.

Knowing every student, valuing them as learners and understanding how to support their learning are all part of holding high expectations. When teachers hold high expectations, it can boost students' confidence and motivation, which in turn can positively impact learning and achievement.

What the evidence says

Why high expectations matter

Teachers' expectations can affect how their students see themselves, what students believe they can achieve and what students actually achieve at school (Good et al. 2018; Wang et al. 2018). Holding high expectations for all students in the classroom is linked with significant learning gains (Wang et al. 2018; Gentrup et al. 2020; Hattie 2023). Importantly, teacher expectation effects are found even after accounting for students' prior achievement. This suggests that the effects of teachers' expectations extend beyond teachers simply predicting what students will achieve based on past performance. Teacher expectations are generally found to have moderate to high effect sizes on measures of student learning and engagement, indicating an above-average effect relative to the many other factors and practices that influence student outcomes (Hattie 2023; Rubie-Davies and Hattie 2024).

Students' experiences of high expectations are also linked with positive engagement outcomes, such as positive learning behaviours, class participation and academic effort (for example, Wang et al. 2019; Rubie-Davies et al. 2020; Benner et al. 2021; Tomaszewski et al. 2022). In NSW, students who report experiencing high expectations from their teachers on average report higher levels of interest and motivation in lessons, greater attendance and more positive school behaviours (CESE 2017b; CESE 2019c).

Having high expectations refers to the way students are 'positioned' by their teachers, which makes it part of the learning environment formed by relationships between teachers and students (Sarra et al. 2018; Perso and Hayward 2020). Conveying high expectations with strong relationships and learning opportunities helps students to see that their teachers know them, believe in them and will support them to succeed. It contributes to culturally inclusive learning environments (Perso and Hayward 2020) and can foster students' motivation and engagement in lessons, which in turn leads to improved academic outcomes (CESE 2017b; CESE 2019c).

High expectations work to improve student outcomes by shaping the experiences and opportunities students receive in the classroom. A large body of evidence on teacher expectations indicates that a teacher's expectations can influence how they interact with students, their teaching practices and the learning opportunities they provide (Wang et al. 2018; Johnston et al. 2019; Rubie-Davies 2023). Studies comparing high and low expectations classrooms find that teachers generally provide learning opportunities and teach in ways that align with their expectations of the students (Rubie-Davies et al. 2015). When teachers have high expectations, they are more likely to use effective teaching strategies that give students consistent opportunities to progress their learning. These include providing challenging learning tasks with explicit learning goals with the appropriate scaffolding, including feedback that helps students to extend their learning in line with their goals (refer to Rubie-Davies [2023] for a review).

Creating an environment of high expectations for all students and providing appropriate support to reach those expectations underpins equity and excellence at a classroom level. Teachers' high expectations can give all students from all backgrounds consistent opportunities to progress their learning and realise their learning potential (Siegle et al. 2016; De Boer et al. 2018).

High expectations support equity and excellence in NSW public education

The department's commitment to equity means we recognise the rights of all students to realise their educational potential. Having high expectations of every student's potential, and reflecting those expectations in practice, programs and policy, is a fundamental step to supporting equity and excellence in the NSW public education system. It underpins our efforts to provide all students with equitable access to high-quality education.

Respectful relationships involving high expectations and high care help to create culturally responsive learning environments to meet the needs of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and support all students to achieve their education potential. The department's [Guiding principles in Leading Aboriginal Education](#) provides evidence-informed tools that support reflective school leadership and enable meaningful, actionable change.

School leaders can find more resources for embedding equity and excellence into their school culture in the forthcoming [Equity guide for leaders in schools](#) (🔒 staff only). All department staff can learn more about how to embed equity in our work in [The Way We Do Policy: Applying an equity lens in education](#) (🔒 staff only).



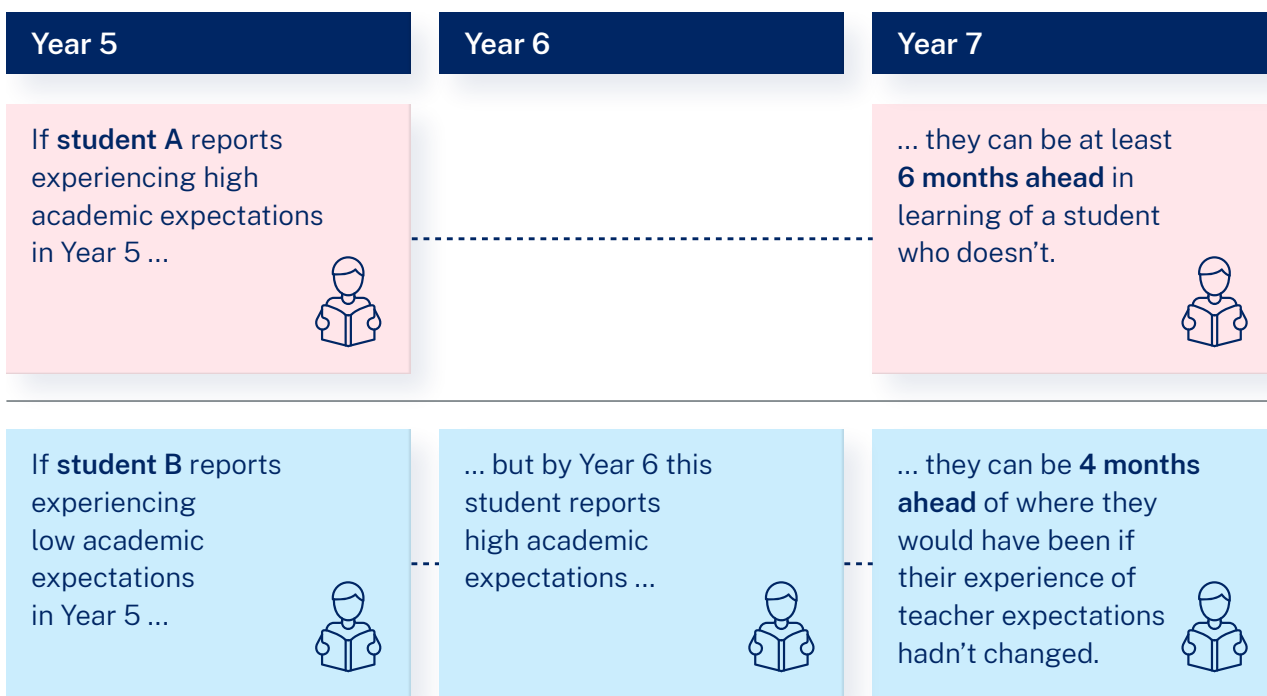
High expectations benefit students in NSW public schools

Survey data from students in NSW public schools find that overall, teachers' high expectations have a positive impact on student achievement (CESE 2017b; CESE 2019c). The survey asked students whether they feel that their teachers value academic achievement and encourage them to work hard and do their best in their schoolwork. When 2 students are identical in terms of socioeconomic status and prior academic performance, a student who agrees that their teachers have high academic expectations of them (and their peers) is over 6 months ahead in their learning by Year 7 (in terms of NAPLAN scores), compared with a student who does not agree (Figure 1.1; CESE 2019c).

The findings also show that teachers can turn around the detrimental effects of low expectations. If a student experiences low expectations in Year 5 but then reports high expectations in Year 6 or 7, they are likely to see a large boost to their learning – the equivalent of up to 4 months (Figure 1.1; CESE 2019c).

Figure 1.1

The effect of teachers' expectations for success on NAPLAN scores



Source: CESE (2019c)

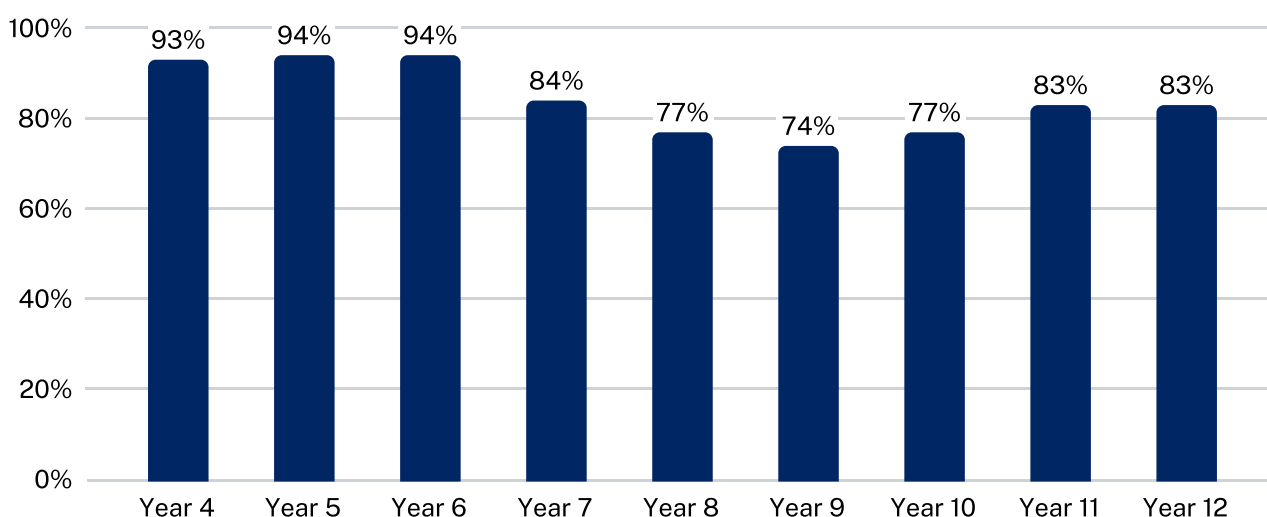
NSW public schools also see the benefits of high expectations for improving student engagement. Students who report experiencing high expectations from their teachers have increased interest and motivation in lessons, greater attendance and more positive school behaviours (CESE 2017b; CESE 2019c; Tomaszewski et al. 2022).

Students experience high expectations differently across different stages of schooling and contextual factors

Survey data suggest that NSW public school students experience different expectations at various stages of their schooling (Figure 1.2). In primary school, 93% to 94% of students reported that their teachers have high academic expectations of them. The proportion decreased in secondary school to 84% in Year 7 and reached a low of 74% in Year 9 before picking up again in Year 11 (83%) and Year 12 (83%). As this data is from students' self-reported experiences of high academic expectations on the survey, the differences between year levels could be due to several factors. They may reflect age-related differences in student perceptions of high expectations (for example, as a function of their overall engagement in school), differences in how teachers practise high expectations with different year levels, or a combination of both.

Figure 1.2

Percentage of students reporting their teachers have high expectations for success, by year level, NSW public schools, 2024



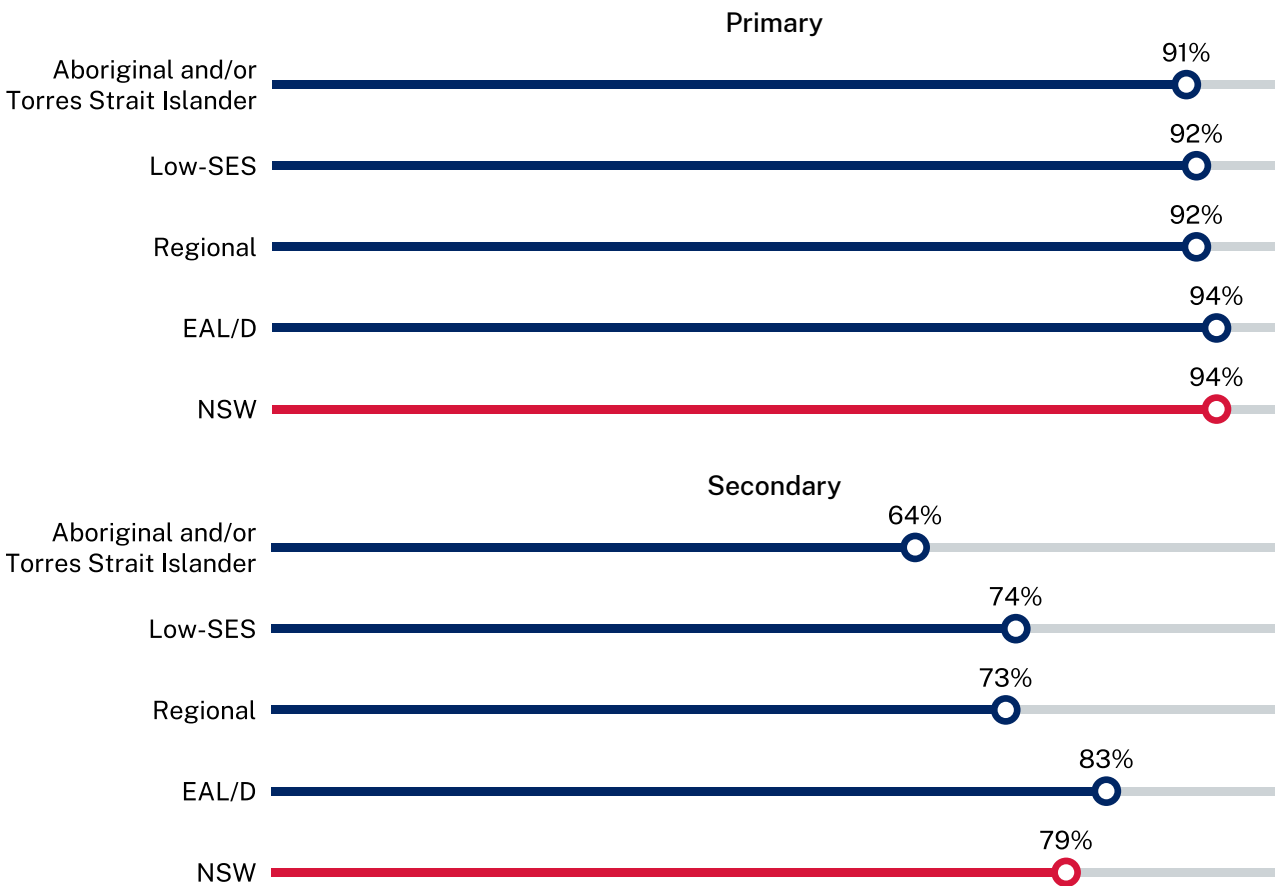
Source: CESE analysis of Tell Them From Me data, collected from 153,159 primary students and 176,831 secondary students across 1,650 NSW public schools in 2024.

Research also suggests that teacher expectations can be influenced by contextual factors related to students' identities or experiences. International studies have found that teacher expectations can be lower for students from some culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse backgrounds (Turner et al. 2015; Williams et al. 2020), low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Westphal et al. 2016), students learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) (Meissel et al. 2017), and students with disability and/or additional learning and support needs (Kashikar et al. 2024). Expectations can be even lower for students who face intersecting forms of disadvantage, such as students with special educational needs who are also from immigrant backgrounds (Pit-ten Cate and Glock 2018). There is also evidence of differing teacher expectations based on gender stereotypes, with some research finding lower expectations for girls in STEM subjects (Gentrup and Rjosk 2018) and boys in literacy (Muntoni and Retelsdorf 2018).

In NSW public schools, there are overall differences in student perceptions of high expectations from teachers based on the contextual factors shown in Figure 1.3. The differences are relatively small in primary school but become more pronounced in secondary school (Figure 1.3).

For secondary students, 79% of survey respondents overall reported experiencing high expectations for success in 2024. This dropped to 74% for students from low-SES backgrounds, 73% for students from regional and remote areas, and 64% for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students (Figure 1.3). In comparison, students learning EAL/D reported higher expectations (83%) than the NSW total. This is a positive finding in relation to NSW research which found that students learning EAL/D who have experienced disruptions to education show growth in learning environments with high expectations and high support (Hammond et al. 2018).

Figure 1.3
Percentage of students reporting high expectations for success, by student contextual factors in primary and secondary years, NSW public schools, 2024



Source: CESE analysis of Tell Them From Me data, collected from 153,159 primary students and 176,831 secondary students across 1,650 NSW public schools in 2024.

‘High challenge and high support’: Evidence from EAL/D education research

High expectations drive learning for all students and are a particular focus in EAL/D education. Research in NSW public schools highlights the importance of creating a culture of high expectations in successful EAL/D classrooms (Hammond et al. 2018; CESE 2021a, 2021b). Effective practice includes:

- **High challenge and high support teaching:** Effective EAL/D teaching provides students with a clear focus on key curriculum knowledge, skills and understanding along with systematic scaffolding so they can achieve those learning goals. The teacher scaffolds learning appropriately so that each student is challenged to learn and supported to achieve syllabus outcomes (CESE 2021a).
- **Creating a culture of cooperation, high care and high achievement:** Strong relationships between teachers and students learning EAL/D help to create a positive school and classroom culture of high care and high expectations. A positive learning culture develops when high levels of trust are created between teachers and students learning EAL/D and their families. It gives students the confidence to take risks with new learning and to develop new identities as successful language learners. Teachers maintain high standards for students, helping them to recognise their academic potential while also providing assistance to complete individual tasks (CESE 2021a).

Teachers can adjust their instruction while holding the same high expectations of success for all students

All students need to be challenged to learn new things. This means that teachers may need to adapt and adjust their instruction to cater for the range of abilities present in their classroom, while maintaining high expectations of learning growth for all students. Research investigating the different teaching practices of teachers with high and low expectations has found that in high expectation classrooms, teachers use adjustments carefully (Rubie-Davies et al. 2015; Hammond et al. 2018; Li 2022). All students are treated as though they will make significant learning gains over the year, and are expected to engage in the complex and challenging tasks needed to achieve these gains. The adjustment is in the instruction – that is, in planning and delivering learning opportunities that allow students to achieve challenging growth goals that are appropriate to their current understandings and abilities (CESE 2019c).

The research literature recognises the complexity of adjusting instruction in highly diverse classrooms (van Geel et al. 2019). Teachers can find it challenging to make adjustments successfully while maintaining high standards for learning, especially without sufficient training and support (Tomlinson 2016). Part of the challenge is that the effectiveness of any given differentiation model depends on classroom contextual factors, such as the students’ learning needs and the goals to be achieved (Pozas and Schneider 2019). Teachers need to learn how to adjust for the various learning needs of their students, including students learning EAL/D and those who have experienced disrupted education (refer to Hammond et al. [2018] and CESE [2021b] for evidence-based guidance).



The high expectations literature supports dynamic approaches to instruction adjustments to avoid conveying low expectations of lower achieving students. In dynamic approaches, any within-class grouping is flexible or based on mixed abilities, closely monitored through low-stakes assessment, and changed regularly as students show progress (Lawrence-Brown and Abkowitz 2023; Rubie-Davies 2023). Lessons may be adapted to meet the needs of individual students using the principles of explicit teaching, effective feedback and assessment. For example, adapting instruction while maintaining high expectations requires setting explicit learning goals and engaging students in regular low-stakes assessment and feedback to monitor and adjust goals as they progress (Martin et al. 2022; Rubie-Davies 2023; refer to CESE 2021c for a [practical guide to effective growth goal setting](#)). These approaches help teachers to know each student’s learning pace and understanding of the content being taught, which in turn facilitates more effective feedback and adjustments in delivering the content (CESE 2019c).

Students achieve high expectations in supportive learning environments built on strong relationships

Quality teacher–student relationships play a central role in supporting students to achieve their teachers’ high expectations in a safe and supportive learning environment (Sarra et al. 2018; Perso and Hayward 2020). Research in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander education describes ‘firm and fair’ aspects of positive relationships in a high expectations culture, in which challenging conversations and actions (being ‘firm’) take place with high levels of trust and safety (established through being ‘fair’) to support all students to learn to a high standard (Stronger Smarter Institute Limited 2014; Sarra et al. 2018). By forming positive relationships that are both ‘firm’ and ‘fair’, teachers can practise culturally responsive teaching within an environment of shared support and cooperation to maintain high expectations for all students (Sarra et al. 2018; CESE 2022c).

Teacher–student relationships also shape how students experience their teachers’ expectations in the classroom. Teachers with high expectations tend to interact with students in ways that build supportive learning environments, characterised by teachers forming warm relationships with all students, knowing them as individuals, their histories and how they learn, and supporting them to succeed in their learning (Rubie-Davies et al. 2015; Li 2022; Rubie-Davies 2023).

When educators develop strong relationships with students they can better understand where students are in their learning and the strengths they bring, and use this knowledge to provide systematic scaffolding of student learning (CESE 2019c). When compared to low expectations, teachers with high expectations are more likely to provide high challenge learning opportunities for all students in the classroom and scaffold students to achieve them. They ask all students questions that challenge their thinking, give opportunities and time to respond, provide feedback that students find helpful, link achievement to effort and goal-setting, and use positive classroom management strategies to build and maintain supportive learning environments (Chen et al. 2011; Rubie-Davies et al. 2015; Wang et al. 2018).

Positive classroom interactions, both of a general nature or centred on specific learning activities, can help students see that their teachers know them and want them to succeed (CESE 2019c). They help to build safe, supportive and inclusive learning environments, in which teachers convey high expectations through their care for student learning and achievement (Johnston et al. 2022). This can improve academic outcomes by fostering students’ motivation and engagement in lessons (CESE 2019c; Martin et al. 2022).

Other What Works Best 2025 resources on high expectations



- What Works Best 2025 practical guide – High expectations
- What Works Best 2025 illustration of practice – High expectations at Coonamble Public School



This is an extract from the **What Works Best 2025 – Evidence guide for excellent schools.**

The full evidence guide provides an overview of the evidence that underpins each of the 8 themes: high expectations, explicit teaching, effective feedback, using data to inform practice, assessment, classroom management, wellbeing and collaboration. It also includes the references for the sources cited in this chapter.

For the full suite of What Works Best 2025 resources, including practical guides and illustrations of practice, scan the QR code or visit education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/education-data-and-research/what-works-best.



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