

Chapter 7

Wellbeing

Key points

- Wellbeing at school encompasses many dimensions, including students' cognitive, social, physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing, and results from many interconnected elements of school and home life.
- Higher levels of wellbeing at school are linked to positive outcomes during and after the school years, including higher academic achievement, strong transitions between primary and secondary school, lower absenteeism, school completion, and positive social behaviours.
- Sense of belonging at school is one key indicator of wellbeing. It reflects the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others at school.
- Despite some recent improvements in students' sense of belonging, NSW, national and international data show a decline over time.
- While schools will always play a role in supporting the breadth of student wellbeing, their greatest opportunity to make a difference may be to facilitate students' sense of belonging by providing a safe environment for both students and staff, ongoing commitment to cultural inclusivity, promoting students' positive relationships with teachers and fostering students' resilience.

What is wellbeing?

Student wellbeing is a broad term that encompasses many dimensions including cognitive, social, physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing (NSW Department of Education and Communities 2015).¹ Wellbeing is closely related to mental health. Having good mental health means students can understand and manage their emotions, show empathy for others and adapt to challenging situations. These factors work together to support overall positive wellbeing (Galderisi et al. 2015).

Student wellbeing results from many interconnected elements of school and home life. Being known, valued and cared for is one of many aspects of students being well and functioning well at school (Soutter et al. 2014).² This sense of connectedness and belonging at school is tied to relationships developed with teachers, friends, peers and other significant members of the school community (Powell et al. 2018). When Australian students and teachers are asked about their own definition of student wellbeing, they list good student–staff and peer relationships as well as being acknowledged, encouraged and supported as its most important aspects (Graham et al. 2016).

- 1 Spiritual wellbeing relates to our sense of meaning and purpose. It can include our connection to culture, religion or community and includes the beliefs, values and ethics we hold (NSW Department of Education and Communities 2015).
- 2 Soutter and colleagues' 2014 review of the literature identifies 7 aspects of wellbeing: having, being, relating, feeling, thinking, functioning and striving. Some of these aspects are outside of schools' sphere of influence. Of the remaining, relating – or connectedness – is considered most important by Australian students and teachers.

Sense of belonging is a key indicator of wellbeing at school

Sense of belonging reflects the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others at school (CESE 2024c). For Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, a sense of belonging encompasses the recognition of their culture. Connecting to Country plays an important role in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students' wellbeing, including their spirituality and identity. Schools that support the development of strong cultural identity can contribute to enhancing a sense of belonging for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students (Yap and Yu 2016). Refer to [Guiding principles in leading Aboriginal education](#) (NSW Department of Education 2025a) and [Strong strides together](#) (CESE 2022c) for further information about the knowledge and capabilities teachers and school leaders can build to support their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students' cultural identity.



What the evidence says

Why wellbeing matters

Students’ positive wellbeing at school is associated with improved student outcomes across a broad range of domains. Research shows students’ positive wellbeing at school is linked to greater academic achievement, strong primary to secondary transitions, completing Year 12, lower absenteeism, positive social behaviours and other beneficial outcomes (Australian Catholic University and Erebus International 2008; The Centre for Adolescent Health 2018; CESE 2019c; O’Connor et al. 2019; Tape et al. 2021; AERO 2023b). The relationship between student wellbeing indicators (such as sense of belonging) and these outcomes is in part due to student engagement (Allen et al. 2018; AERO 2023b). Student engagement refers to the extent to which students identify with and value schooling outcomes, and participate in academic and non-academic school activities (Willms 2003). When students experience a positive sense of belonging at school, they also show higher levels of effort, interest and motivation, and lower levels of absenteeism, leading to improved learning outcomes (CESE 2020d). By contrast, when students do not feel they belong at school, they also tend to reject school values, withdraw from school activities, and become alienated or disaffected.

Students’ wellbeing at school has also been linked to positive outcomes beyond their schooling years. For example, an Australian study found that those reporting lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress in young adulthood were more likely to have reported a higher sense of belonging at secondary school (Allen et al. 2024). Paying attention to student wellbeing acknowledges the pivotal role of education in preparing students for a rewarding life beyond school.

Statewide, national and international trends indicate declining sense of belonging

Despite some recent improvements in students’ sense of belonging, NSW, national and international data show a decline over time. Figure 7.1 shows PISA results for 15-year-old students reporting if they felt like they belong at school from 2012 to 2022. The trend from 2012 to 2018 shows a consistent decline for the OECD average, Australia and NSW. Between 2018 and 2022, results for NSW stayed relatively stable and there was a small increase for Australia and the OECD average. In 2022, however, both the percentage of NSW students (68%) and Australian students (70%) who reported they felt like they belong at school was below the OECD average (75%) (De Bortoli et al. 2024). More recently, in 2024, internal CESE analysis of NSW student survey data found that around 86% of primary students and 60% of secondary students in NSW public schools reported a positive sense of belonging.

High expectations

Explicit teaching

Effective feedback

Using data to inform practice

Assessment

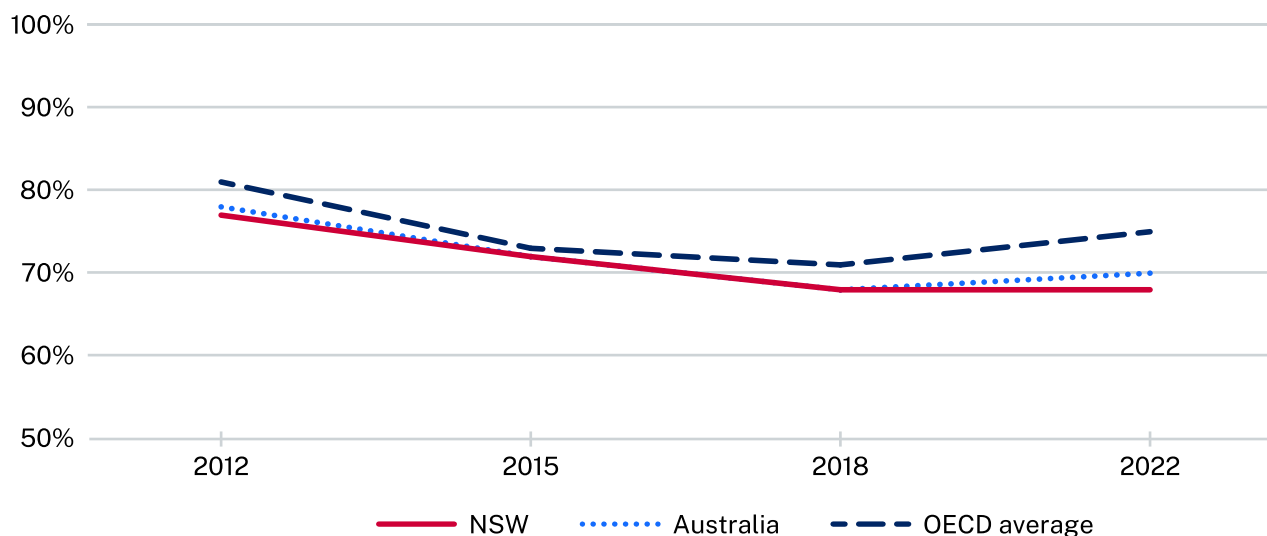
Classroom management

Wellbeing

Collaboration

Figure 7.1

Percentage of 15-year-old students reporting positive sense of belonging at school between 2012 and 2022

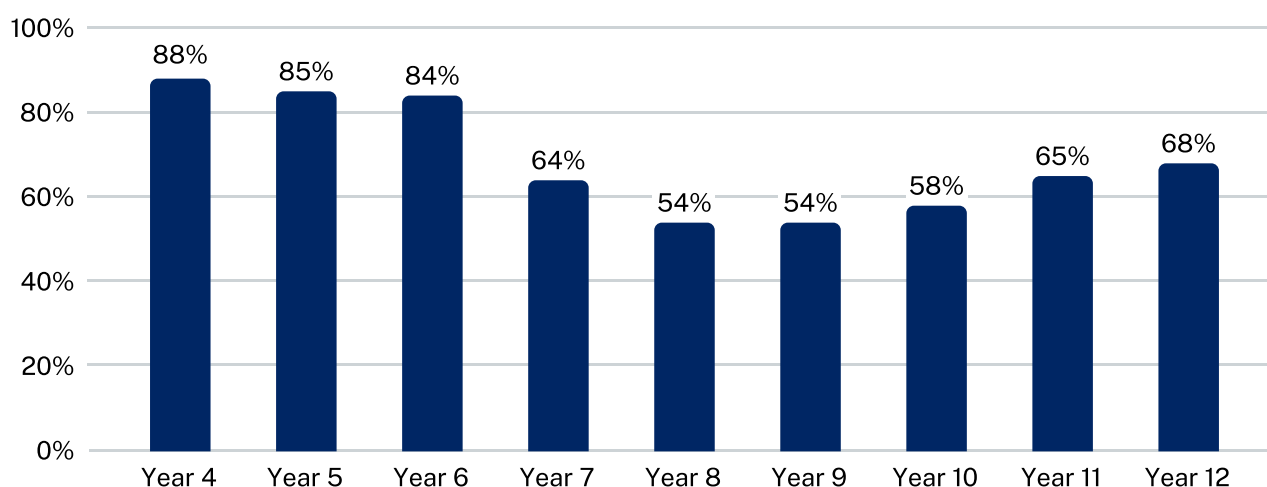


Source: CESE internal analysis of PISA data.

Survey data from students in NSW also suggest that students experience different levels of connectedness to school at different stages of their schooling. Sense of belonging drops as students transition to secondary school, drops further during the middle years, and then increases slightly in the senior years (Figure 7.2). The transition to secondary school often involves a move to a new school, which can disrupt friendships and raise academic stakes in an often larger and more impersonal school environment (Healy and Stroman 2021). The department's [Enhancing the transition to high school for students](#) (🔒 staff only) webpage provides resources and strategies to make the transition to secondary school more successful for students.

Figure 7.2

Percentage of students reporting positive sense of belonging, 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.

Some student groups have lower levels of wellbeing at school

Research shows that some specific groups of students may face barriers or challenges to their wellbeing both in and outside of school. For example, some students from a refugee background (Leeuwestein et al. 2024) or exposed to a natural disaster (CESE 2020e) may have experienced stressful, adverse life events that can negatively impact wellbeing. Experiences of racism, systematic bias, discrimination, bullying and social exclusion within and outside of school may also contribute to lower levels of wellbeing among some students – including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (Sulkowski et al. 2012). In Australia, 2022 PISA data shows that male students and students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds reported greater sense of belonging at school than female students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds respectively (De Bortoli et al. 2024). Analysis of NSW student survey data also found that declines in sense of belonging at school have been largest among girls, low-SES students and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students (refer to CESE 2024c).

Not every student in these groups will experience low wellbeing at school. These group level trends, however, suggest it is important to consider and address specific needs or barriers to help support all students feel included, understood and connected to their peers, teachers and other members of the school community (Sulkowski et al. 2012).

School characteristics and whole-school practices can influence wellbeing at school

Student wellbeing cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader school context and some schools may face challenges to student wellbeing that are beyond their direct influence. Whether or not the driving force behind low or declining wellbeing is located inside or outside the school gate, school practices can still help to support students' wellbeing. For example, schools in rural and regional areas can face geographic isolation and limited access to wellbeing support services, which can impact student wellbeing at and outside of school (Beswick et al. 2022). However, other characteristics of these schools can serve as protective factors for student wellbeing. For example, some schools in rural and regional areas have smaller class sizes and more time for students to talk with teachers one on one compared to schools in metropolitan areas. This can lead to positive impacts on students' academic motivation and their perception of teacher support (Allen et al. 2018).

Schools will always play a role in supporting the breadth of student wellbeing and some of the strongest evidence is for the impact of initiatives to improve students' sense of belonging (Hoare et al. 2025). Sense of belonging can be facilitated by providing a safe environment for both students and staff, ongoing commitment to cultural inclusivity, promoting students' positive relationships with teachers and fostering students' resilience. A whole-school approach is important in addressing the interconnected and interdependent nature of these aspects of sense of belonging.

Safety is integral to wellbeing at school

A safe school is one where the physical and emotional environment does not lead to harm or injury for students. This includes a school community that is committed to establishing and maintaining a culturally inclusive environment and addressing negative behaviours such as bullying.

The physical school environment includes the school building, physical structures, furniture, the site on which a school is located, and the surrounding environment including the air, water and materials with which students may come into contact. Risk and asset management practices are important for maintaining a safe physical school environment. There is limited research on the direct link between the built school environment and student wellbeing at school; however, some findings suggest that the physical environment sets the stage for positive perceptions of school (CDC 2009; Allen and Kern 2017; Healy and Stroman 2021). The availability of supervised recreational spaces and opportunities to play and socialise can support students' connection to their peers. A clean and pleasant environment also sets expectations for safety and for positive, respectful relationships.

An emotionally safe school environment means students feel safe to attend and know they will be supported should they encounter any difficulties. It is an environment that fosters positive and respectful relationships between students, and where students feel supported and advocated for. Analysis of NSW student survey data over time shows that schools that provide a positive environment for both students and staff, and support students' social engagement and positive teacher–student relations, also tend to see more positive changes in students' sense of belonging (refer to CESE 2024c).³ These protective factors can be especially important for vulnerable groups of students. For example, Ullman (2022) conducted an online survey of 685 Australian students in Years 7 to 12 who identified as trans/gender-diverse and found that students' sense of belonging hinged upon an accepting and inclusive school environment.

³ While there is little direct research on the link between staff wellbeing and student wellbeing, some researchers suggest that teachers who feel good about themselves and in their job are better able to build good relationships with students and provide consistent expectations in the classroom (Allen and Kern 2017; Viac and Fraser 2020).



Effectively responding to bullying

Bullying can be a particular threat to students' safety at school. A positive school environment that emphasises anti-bullying policies is fundamental to student wellbeing and reinforces inclusiveness. The nationally agreed definition of bullying is used by all Australian schools (NSW Department of Education 2025b):

Bullying is an ongoing and deliberate misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that intends to cause physical, social and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power, or perceived power, over one or more persons who feel unable to stop it from happening.

Bullying can happen in person or online, via various digital platforms and devices and it can be obvious (overt) or hidden (covert). Bullying behaviour is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time (for example, through sharing of digital records).

Bullying of any form or for any reason can have immediate, medium and long-term effects on those involved, including bystanders. Single incidents and conflict or fights between equals, whether in person or online, are not defined as bullying.

Bullying negatively impacts student wellbeing (Sae-Koew et al. 2024). Students who are the target of bullying have been found to also have a higher likelihood of experiencing anxiety and depression (Romano et al. 2020) and are at risk of lower academic achievement (Glew et al. 2005).



Cyberbullying is a growing concern in Australia and internationally as digital technologies have become part of many aspects of students' lives. Although it is unclear whether the prevalence of cyberbullying is increasing in Australia (Sae-Koew et al. 2024), analysis of NSW public school student survey data provides some insights into prevalence trends of reported experiences of moderate and severe physical, verbal, social and cyberbullying between 2016 and 2023 (Mental Health Commission of NSW 2023):⁴

- Primary students (Years 4 to 6)
 - Verbal bullying and social bullying were the most common types of bullying reported over time.
 - All types of bullying show a declining trend, except cyberbullying, which has increased among primary school students from 8.1% in 2016 to 12.6% in 2023.
- Secondary students (Years 7 to 12)
 - Verbal bullying and social bullying were the most common types of bullying reported over time.
 - Unlike in primary schools, all types of bullying have increased over time.

There is a large and growing body of evidence that suggests school-based interventions can be successful in reducing bullying behaviours (CESE 2017c). There are similarities between in person and cyberbullying behaviours, however there are also some distinct features associated with cyberbullying that effective interventions need to address (Sae-Koew et al. 2024). For example, cyberbullying can happen at any time, anonymity can make it difficult to identify those involved, and witnesses may misinterpret it as harmless. For evidence-based resources and information to support school communities to prevent and respond to bullying effectively, refer to the department's [Anti-bullying](#) and [Cybermarvel](#) webpages and the eSafety Commissioner's [Spotlight on cyberbullying](#) webpage.

⁴ Students were asked about their experiences of physical, verbal, social or cyberbullying in the past 4 weeks. Primary school students were considered to have experienced 'moderate' bullying if they reported 2 types of bullying, or 'severe' bullying if they reported 3 or more types of bullying. Secondary students were considered to have experienced 'moderate' bullying if they reported any physical bullying, or any one of verbal, social, or cyberbullying more than once a week. Secondary students were considered to have experienced 'severe' bullying if they reported physical bullying more than once a week, or any one of verbal, social or cyberbullying at least 4 to 5 times a week.

Commitment to a culturally inclusive environment can support sense of belonging

The ongoing commitment by school leaders, teachers and other staff to establishing and maintaining a culturally inclusive environment can facilitate sense of belonging for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Culturally inclusive practice focuses on intergroup relations among students, relationships between the school, parents and community, communication and consultative decision-making strategies, representative student voice and leadership, acceptance of diversity as normal and comfortable, and culturally inclusive curriculum content and pedagogy (NSW Department of Education 2023a).

Anti-racism education also plays a vital role in promoting cultural inclusion in schools. It aims to support school communities to prevent and address racism. The NSW Department of Education's (2024a) [Anti-racism policy](#) notes that racism has a particular impact on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. For example, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples may not feel welcome and safe in school environments due to the influence of historic and systemic exclusion from education, experiences of racism and discrimination, and the existence of deficit views of Aboriginal peoples and cultures (Krakouer 2015; Commonwealth of Australia 2017; Morrison et al. 2019). Proactively addressing these barriers can facilitate connectedness between the school and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, staff, families and communities.

NSW student survey data shows that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students who report feeling good about their culture at school also report more positive responses to other indicators of wellbeing at school, including sense of belonging (CESE 2022c). To enhance Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students' positive feelings about culture at school, schools can draw on students' cultural knowledge and experiences to deliver relevant learning opportunities (Barber et al. 2019) and curriculum content (Lowe et al. 2019), and work closely with families and communities to better understand the strengths, needs, and aspirations of their students (Dillon et al. 2020; CESE 2022c). Refer to the department's [Anti-racism education](#) resources for further information to support the implementation of anti-racism education in schools.

Advocacy from adults can support students' sense of belonging

Students consistently say that their relationships with adults at school provide an important source of ongoing support that enables them to thrive (Dunleavy and Milton 2009). For many students, their teacher or teachers may provide this support, though other adults across the school can also be advocates for students. Survey data from students in NSW shows that those students reporting high levels of advocacy at school – that is, having an adult or adults on their side and working in their best interests – experience an enhanced sense of belonging (CESE 2020b). Advocacy appears to be an important protective factor during periods of transition, such as the transition from primary school to secondary school (CESE 2020b). School practices that can promote advocacy include providing opportunities to build relationships, encouraging student voice, establishing programs to support teachers to get to know their students and providing targeted support. For further information on supporting student advocacy, refer to CESE's (2020b) [Supporting advocacy at school](#).

Everyday resilience and sense of belonging reinforce each other

Fostering students' everyday resilience is another aspect of supporting students to be well and function well at school. Everyday resilience at school relates to a student's ability to overcome setbacks and challenges that are typical of day-to-day school life, such as receiving an occasional poor grade or negative feedback.⁵ Joint research between CESE and UNSW found that everyday resilience and belonging to school reinforce each other over time (Bostwick et al. 2022). This pattern of results was similar across a range of schools, such as small and large schools, and comprehensive and selective schools. For students who are uncertain about their belonging at school, everyday challenges like poor grades can seem to threaten it further (Healy and Stroman 2021). For other students, their sense of belonging may protect them from engaging in self-sabotaging beliefs and behaviours that often follow academic difficulty. In turn, more resilient students may seek more connections or interpret school activities as more inclusive than less resilient students. For more information about how to foster everyday resilience, refer to CESE's (2022b) [Everyday resilience – What Works Best in practice](#).

⁵ In the literature, 'everyday resilience' is called 'academic buoyancy' (Martin and Marsh 2008). It emphasises proactive and adaptive approaches to overcoming academic adversity.

Other What Works Best 2025 resources on wellbeing



- What Works Best 2025 practical guide – Wellbeing
- What Works Best 2025 illustration of practice – Wellbeing at Temora 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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