

What Works Best 2025

Illustration of practice

High expectations at Coonamble Public School

Coonamble Public School fosters a culture of high expectations grounded in the belief that every student has ability, can learn, and is genuinely valued. Staff work with students, families and community to create ambitious learning goals and provide tailored support to achieve those goals in a safe and respectful learning environment. The school's processes for positive behaviour and wellbeing set a solid foundation for students to engage with learning and build respectful relationships. Teachers know and value students and use effective strategies, which helps create positive classroom environments where students feel safe to take risks, make mistakes and grow in their learning.

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



How to use this resource

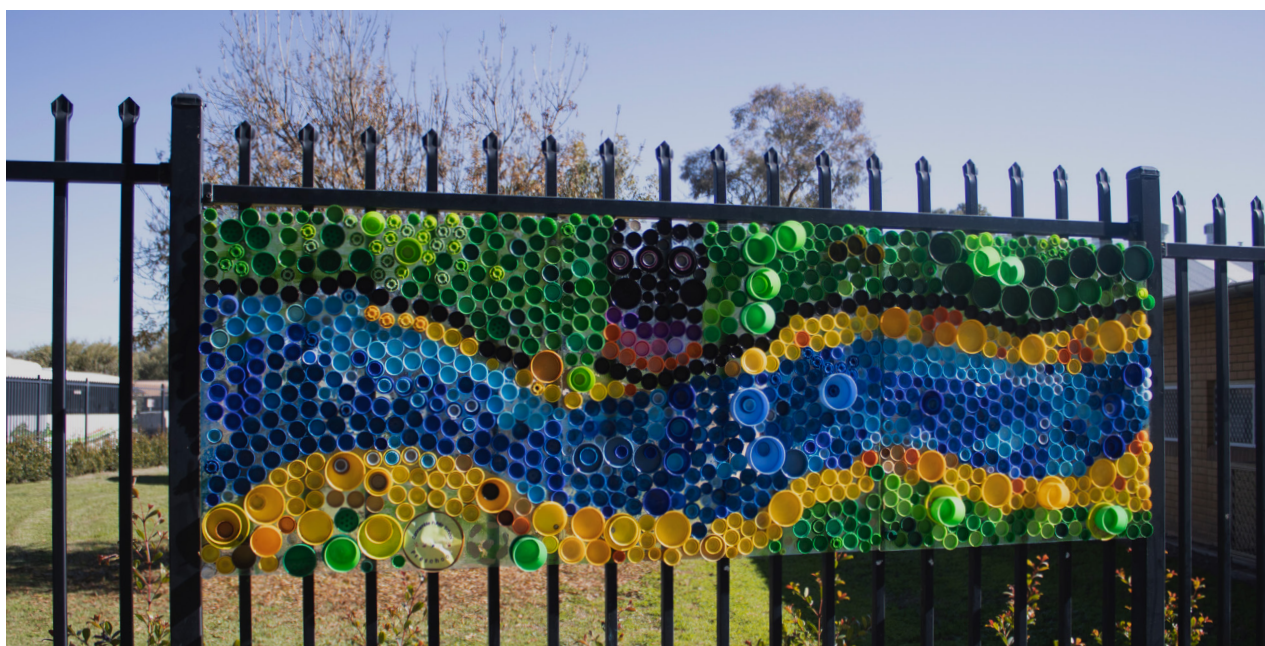
This resource is part of the illustrations of practice series for What Works Best 2025. It provides teachers and school leaders with descriptions of some of the key strategies used at Coonamble Public School to implement high expectations. It is not intended to capture all aspects of high expectations at the school, and it is important for readers of this resource to consider how strategies and practices should be responsive to the learning needs and goals of students in their own school.

Teachers and school leaders can read, consider, discuss and implement strategies highlighted in this illustration of practice and its accompanying resources as part of school-developed High Impact Professional Learning (HIPL). The appropriate time to use this resource may differ for each school, leader and teacher.

Other What Works Best 2025 resources on high expectations



- What Works Best 2025 evidence guide for excellent schools – Chapter 1: High expectations
- What Works Best 2025 practical guide – High expectations



School details

- Coonamble Public School is on the land of the Wailwan and Gamilaraay people. It is in north-west NSW, approximately 170 km north of Dubbo.
- Coonamble Public School is a remote school with a FOEI of 193.¹
- There are 229 students enrolled from preschool to Year 6 and a support unit of 4 classes: 3 multi-categorical classes and 1 mild intellectual disability class.
- The school is a Connected Communities school, with 86% of students identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Local Aboriginal culture and Gamilaraay language and culture is taught in every class.
- The school's 2024 NAPLAN achievement for Year 5 students was well above students from similar backgrounds for all domains.
- High potential and gifted students are identified and extended through their personalised learning pathways (PLPs), as well as internal and external data sources. Identified students are also invited to apply for Aurora College's Young and Deadly Mob program, which extends students' learning while maintaining connectedness to culture and community.²
- High staff mobility and a large proportion of beginning teachers (44% in 2025) present a challenge in maintaining consistency in the implementation of teaching strategies.³ The school has strong structures in place to support teachers, including an extended induction process, structured professional learning and funding for an additional assistant principal, curriculum and instruction (AP, C&I). The 2 APs, C&I work closely with staff to strengthen continuity of improved teaching strategies for literacy and numeracy through curriculum implementation.

1 The Australian Bureau of Statistics' Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) is used to define regional, rural and remote schools. Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI) is a school-level index of educational disadvantage related to socioeconomic background. The average FOEI value is 100. A higher FOEI value indicates a higher level of disadvantage.

2 [Aurora College](#) is a virtual school in NSW that specialises in delivering educational programs for high potential and gifted students.

3 The percentage of beginning teachers in comparison to experienced teachers in the school is based on NESA accreditation status.

“Everyone can learn, and everyone has the right to learn. It is not dependent on your socioeconomic status, physical appearance, cultural background, family circumstances or where you live. Every child has ability and can be taught, and they are entitled to a quality education. We have that belief system and mindset and then implement the strategies and practices to provide each student with the appropriate learning that will ensure they improve and succeed.”

Annette Thomson, Executive Principal

Strategy 1: Teachers and leaders work shoulder-to-shoulder to enact high expectations in the classroom

“ We do get excited because we can see they’re succeeding and it’s because we’ve given them a great scaffold to be able to succeed. That’s the high expectations. The scaffolds are supporting them to do those more complex tasks.”

Rebecca McIntyre, AP, C&I

Every student at Coonamble Public School is encouraged to aim high and supported to succeed. School staff visibly expect success of all students and deliver high-quality teaching practices that enable students to improve their learning. This is coupled with an understanding of their students’ diverse learning needs. With support from the principal, school leaders work shoulder-to-shoulder with teachers to tailor teaching and learning according to students’ individual learning needs and goals. The collaborative, whole-school approach ensures that all students engage in appropriately challenging learning opportunities.

The APs, C&I at Coonamble Public School play a central role in embedding high expectations and high support for quality teaching that addresses diverse learning needs. They work in partnership with classroom teachers to help them make decisions about where students are in their learning, where they need to go and how to get them there, from students who need extension to those who need intensive support to access the syllabus.

For example, one AP, C&I worked closely with the classroom teacher of a combined Year 3/4 class to teach writing to students who were performing below the expected syllabus outcomes. The students needed tailored support to work towards their individual learning goals and achieve the high expectations. To provide this support, the AP, C&I and classroom teacher took the approach of working shoulder-to-shoulder to co-plan, co-teach and co-reflect throughout the writing unit.

The AP, C&I and classroom teacher planned an explicit teaching approach, including the use of structured scaffolding adjusted to each student’s learning needs, goals and aspirations in line with their personalised learning pathways (PLPs). They developed clear learning intentions and success criteria, with quality work samples to show the students what success looks like. A detailed learning sequence mapped out how students would progress towards the learning intentions. The AP, C&I also developed a writing mat containing clear prompts for each area of focus for students to use as a scaffold, with explicit instructions on how and when to use it.

The AP, C&I and classroom teacher made regular time to reflect together on students’ progress, including looking at the results of a fortnightly writing assessment. The collaborative reflection helped the classroom teacher to make decisions about when to move between modelling, guided and independent practice for each student as they developed their writing skills and confidence.

Practice point: Using assessment to build students' skills, stamina and confidence

“ On Fridays in even weeks we hold a writing assessment. During this assessment, students receive a text accompanied by a visual prompt and specific instructions. Teachers facilitate a brainstorming session on the board, after which students independently compose their writing without the use of writing mats. The purpose of the assessment is to build stamina and confidence, as well as the gradual release of the scaffolding (gradual release of responsibility).”

Rebecca McIntyre, AP, C&I

The students' writing improved over the year. The classroom teacher and AP, C&I saw students progress from being reluctant to write at all, to relying heavily on the scaffolding, to having scaffolds removed as they gained proficiency.⁴ Importantly, this strategy took place in a trusting and culturally inclusive learning environment. The classroom teacher built positive relationships with the students and took the time to get to know them. This meant that the students felt comfortable and confident to have a go, make mistakes, take risks and 'be a learner'.

“ I have high expectations of all my students, regardless of their level of learning. I think you've got to know your students. I value them as learners, and I support their learning.”

Stacey Hughes, Classroom teacher

4 Refer to the NSW Department of Education's gradual release of responsibility model for techniques to support students towards increasing independence as they develop knowledge and skills.



Strategy 2: Setting and supporting high expectations for behaviour to get students ‘learning ready’

“ All staff are trained in trauma-informed practice so that they understand the connection between wellbeing and cognitive functioning, and how these impact on the ability to focus and ultimately be learning ready with a mindset of high expectations. It’s the high expectations that drive all the other stuff you do underneath to develop their potential and lead to successful outcomes.”

Annette Thomson, Executive Principal

Coonamble Public School has a strong focus on wellbeing for learning, centred on using practices that are trauma-informed, culturally responsive and prepare students to be ‘learning ready’. The community has a history of trauma and disadvantage, and not all students always come to school ready to learn, which involves being mentally, emotionally and physically prepared to engage in the learning process. Previously, this had led to high rates of disruptive behaviour at the school. The principal needed an approach to set high expectations for student behaviour and support students to meet those expectations.

The school has implemented Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL), a framework that brings together the whole school community to develop a positive, safe and supportive learning culture. Behavioural expectations are a key part of the school’s approach to implementing the framework. Staff found that when students have clear expectations for behaviour, it creates a positive and focused learning environment where students are more likely to succeed. This helps teachers to set and maintain high expectations for learning.

The first 5 weeks of the school year focus on the explicit teaching of Coonamble Public School’s whole-school expectations of being a safe and respectful learner. Teachers clearly define the expectations and teach, model and reinforce what each expectation looks like. Students have regular opportunities to practise the expected behaviours and are shown how to correct inappropriate behaviours. This approach of teaching positive behaviour in the first 5 weeks across the whole school provides shared understanding and consistency to help all students learn the norms and routines and know what is expected of them. Teachers revisit the expectations after holidays, breaks and as needed throughout the year.

There are many examples of expectations that are explicitly taught, such as how to participate in class (for example, by raising hands to answer questions), the processes for handing out equipment and packing up, how to go to assembly and what group work and independent learning look like. Teachers incorporate the behavioural expectations into lesson content so that students learn to follow the rules and routines without taking away from teaching and learning time.

It is important to note that behavioural expectations are not the same thing as high expectations for learning. Expectations for behaviour, together with the wellbeing support to meet those expectations, contribute to a positive learning environment in which students can achieve high expectations for learning.

“ If you don’t set your classroom up with the expectations, routines and structure within those first 5 weeks, you’re not going to get the expected learning outcomes from the students.”

Stacey Hughes, Classroom teacher

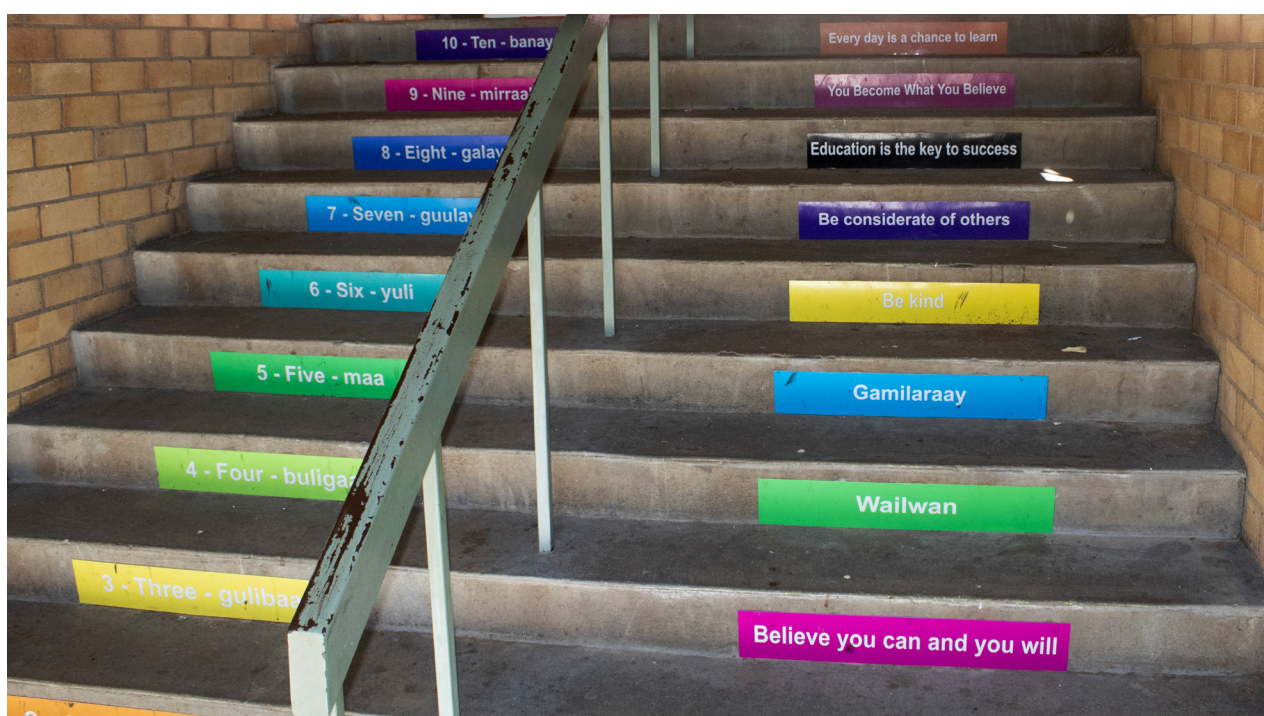
Practice point: Setting behavioural expectations across the whole school from the first day

“ [Behavioural expectations] start right from day one in that we have our establishment phase at the beginning of the year. We have a bank of PBL lessons that every class implements.⁵ Teachers may adjust those for the age and stage that they’re teaching, but they’re the same non-negotiable lessons that every student needs to know. We teach the processes, and those processes become routines so that every student knows exactly what is expected of them, whether it be for lining up, going home, handing out work, going to the toilet, going to assemblies – all of these things.”

**Jodi Prentice,
 Assistant Principal – Mentor**

The school has strong wellbeing structures in place to help students meet behavioural expectations and strengthen the skills needed to engage in learning. For example, in 2019, the principal used funding from the department’s Connected Communities Strategy to set up the Maliyan room, a well-staffed wellbeing centre that operates across the care continuum. The Maliyan team includes an Aboriginal youth worker – who was already well known and respected in the community – along with an assistant principal, wellbeing, and a wellbeing teacher, a part-time external psychologist, 2 school learning support officers (SLSOs), the learning and support teacher, and the part-time school chaplain. The Maliyan room provides a calm, safe place for students and staff. It is not a place for students to disengage, but rather a place where students can receive additional support to reengage in learning as soon as practicable. Staff in the room use trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices tailored to the student and their needs.

5 The Positive Behaviour for Learning framework can support the explicit teaching of behaviour.



“ We called it the Maliyan room because ‘Maliyan’ is Gamilaraay for ‘eagle’ and we wanted the kids to soar.”

Annette Thomson, Executive Principal

The school’s common language around being ‘learning ready’ supports the use of the Maliyan room. The consistency in language helps students to understand the expectations for being ready to learn and what to do when they are not ready. They are taught to identify when they are feeling unprepared for learning and how to communicate their needs to their teachers. The shared language also allows teachers to communicate calmly with students when disengaged behaviours are emerging – they can ask the student, “Are you learning ready?” and, if the student responds that they are not, “Do you need to go over to the Maliyan room and then come back?” The Maliyan room prioritises preparing students to return to learning, ensuring that students have the tools and support they need to engage effectively in the classroom.

Teachers describe the Maliyan room as an example of how the school’s high expectations for student behaviour are supported by processes and structures to help students achieve those expectations. School staff see how the school’s wellbeing strategy drives improved learning by creating a positive, culturally respectful learning environment in which students can achieve ambitious learning goals.

The structure and operations within the Maliyan room have evolved and strengthened since 2019, with changes informed by school self-evaluation processes as well as feedback from

community and students. All wellbeing structures and initiatives are driven through Strategic Direction 2 in the School Excellence Plan, where improvements are planned, changes implemented, data and evidence tracked, and reviews of practice considered. The strongest evidence of improvement has been a sustained significant reduction in suspension rates and a decrease in the number of students leaving the classroom to visit the Maliyan room. This is attributed to the proactive work of the wellbeing team in developing individualised plans and interventions for students where they are supported to be in their classroom. Trend data for attendance in the Maliyan room has a strong correlation to events which occur in the community and impact on student and family wellbeing. The wellbeing team and school leadership works closely with agencies within the community to respond and support students and families in a timely and appropriate way.⁶

“ My mantra was, and still is, ‘It’s wellbeing for learning. You can’t just stop at the wellbeing. You must prepare the kids to get to the learning.’ What we’re trying to do is ensure the learning in classrooms is not disrupted while we work with the students who are not ready to learn in a supported, dedicated space to assist them to be capable of returning to their classroom and engage in learning. Take care of their wellbeing needs and get back to the learning.”

Annette Thomson, Executive Principal

6 For the purposes of this and other What Works Best practical guides and illustrations of practice, ‘families’ includes biological parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, legal guardians, kin carers, out-of-home (foster) carers, extended family members and other significant adults with caring responsibilities.

Strategy 3: Establishing shared expectations with families through learning report meetings

Coonamble Public School fosters strong partnerships with families to create a shared culture of high expectations. Teachers and school leaders are responsible for creating an environment in which families are heard, welcomed and included in their children’s learning. The school is committed to respectful community engagement and implements communication strategies to build trust and maintain open conversations with families. The school’s communication is based on respect for the community’s experiences, values and needs. It provides an inclusive and responsive environment in which families and teachers work together to support shared high expectations of students.

“As a Connected Communities school, we actively invite families to participate, recognising that many have had challenging schooling experiences themselves. We witness a positive shift as parents become more engaged in their child’s learning, gaining a deeper understanding of their progress and future goals.”

Rebecca McIntyre, AP, C&I

One key strategy is a structured approach to learning report meetings, in which teachers discuss an individual student’s learning with families face-to-face. The meetings are held twice a year (Week 7 of Term 2 and Term 4) in step with the school reporting periods, and are part of the school’s personalised learning pathway (PLP) process. Learning report meetings focus on discussing a student’s learning progress, achievements and ongoing goals and aspirations.

During the meetings, teachers make sure they use clear and specific language when describing a student’s learning and achievement. They take care to be realistic about where the student is in their learning while also being supportive. One way they do this is by sharing specific work samples that show the student’s current level of work and the level they are working towards. These offer concrete examples to help families see not just where their children are in their learning but also where they are going. The visual examples ensure all families can engage meaningfully in conversations about student learning, regardless of reading preferences or literacy background. Teachers find that using work samples in this way helps to anchor the conversation in a shared understanding of the student’s goals and the support they need to achieve them.



Practice point: Forming a shared understanding of a student's progress

“ In learning report meetings with parents and carers, we're mindful of the language we use. It's important to clearly show what at-grade achievement looks like, so they understand why a student might be receiving the grade they are. But beyond that, we focus our conversations on 'where to next' – not dwelling on where a student isn't yet, but on the next steps to support their growth.”

Rebecca McIntyre, AP, C&I

The meetings also offer families a chance to ask questions and discuss how to support their children at home. Teachers actively listen and try to learn more about their students' experiences and home values. The open, 2-way communication builds trust and a sense of collaboration in a way that is culturally responsive and respectful. By working in partnership, the school and families create a positive learning environment for students where high expectations are clearly communicated and supported.

Resources

Strategy 1:

- NSW Department of Education (2025) [Gradual release of responsibility](#)
- NSW Department of Education (2025) [Reading, writing and numeracy guides – downloadable writing guides](#) (🔒 staff only)
- NSW Department of Education (n.d.) [Curriculum planning for every student in every classroom](#)

Strategy 2:

- NSW Department of Education (n.d.) [Behaviour support toolkit](#)
- NSW Department of Education (n.d.) [Hub operational guidelines and support materials](#) (🔒 staff only)
- AERO (2024) [Foundational classroom management resources handbook](#)
- AERO (2023) [High expectations for student behaviour: their role in classroom management](#)

Strategy 3:

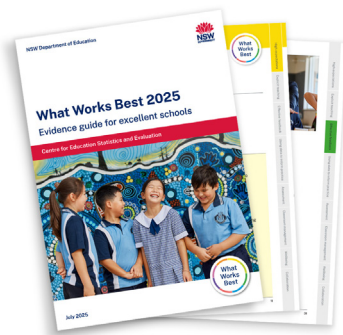
- Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2022) [Strong strides together – meeting the educational goals for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students](#)
- NSW Department of Education (2025) [Personalised learning pathways guidelines](#)

Access the full suite of What Works Best resources

What Works Best 2025 is a suite of resources for teachers and school leaders that outlines 8 effective practices that are known to improve student learning and wellbeing:

- high expectations
- explicit teaching
- effective feedback
- using data to inform practice
- assessment
- classroom management
- wellbeing
- collaboration.

The resources can be used individually or in conjunction with one another to implement evidence-based, quality teaching and learning practices and inform school excellence planning.



The What Works Best 2025 – Evidence guide for excellent schools provides an overview of the evidence that underpins each of the 8 themes.



The What Works Best practical guides translate evidence into practice by providing teachers and school leaders with practical ideas for implementing each of the themes in their classrooms and schools. The guides unpack not only ‘what’ should be done to successfully implement a theme, but also the ‘how’ and ‘why’.



The What Works Best illustrations of practice provide teachers and school leaders with examples of how some of our great schools from across NSW have implemented the themes.

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

GPO Box 33, Sydney NSW 2001, Australia

✉ info.cese@det.nsw.edu.au

🌐 education.nsw.gov.au/cese

🌐 yammer.com/det.nsw.edu.au

Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

