

What Works Best 2025

Practical guide

High expectations

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

How to use this guide

This resource is part of the **practical guide series** for What Works Best 2025. It provides teachers and school leaders with practical ideas for fostering high expectations in their school. It is not intended to capture all aspects of high expectations, and it is important to consider how strategies and practices should be responsive to the learning needs and goals of students.

Before engaging with these ideas, it may be useful to first consider your current practice, values and beliefs, and how they influence teaching and learning. What is working well, and which areas could be strengthened? The following ideas may support you when planning next steps.



What are high expectations?

High expectations describes both a teaching mindset and the ways in which teachers act on that mindset to support student learning. Teachers with high expectations believe that every student can and should work towards achieving ambitious learning goals. They communicate this belief to all students and use effective teaching strategies that support students to set and achieve challenging goals.

Why do high expectations matter?

Students are more likely to succeed in their learning when their teachers expect and support them to succeed. Teachers' beliefs about students and what they can achieve influence their teaching and learning interactions. This can impact students' confidence, motivation and achievement. All students deserve to experience and benefit from high expectations.

How do the following ideas for implementing high expectations work with the other themes in the What Works Best practical guides?

Teachers with high expectations for all students use effective teaching practices that help every student to learn, grow and belong at school. Teachers can convey **high expectations** for learning by using evidence-based practices when implementing **explicit teaching**, **effective feedback** and **assessment**. The ideas included in the **classroom management** and **wellbeing** practical guides help teachers to build positive learning environments and relationships that support students to engage in learning and strive to achieve ambitious learning goals. The ideas in the **using data to inform practice** and **collaboration** practical guides support teachers to implement effective teaching practices in their classrooms, evaluate their practice and reflect on progress to ensure all students are challenged and successful.

Although the themes reinforce each other, the ideas included here and in the other practical guides are not intended to be introduced and implemented all at once. Rather, teachers and school leaders are encouraged to identify what areas to focus on as part of a planned approach to implementation.¹

¹ Refer to the NSW Department of Education's [School excellence planning](#) webpage.

The relationship between high expectations and explicit teaching

Explicit teaching is critical to holding high expectations for all students and provides the means to achieve them. Having high standards for students and providing clear, supportive and structured instruction enables students to experience success. This creates a sense of agency in learning and fosters student wellbeing. High expectations without clear, scaffolded support may result in student frustration, disengagement or failure. Conversely, explicit teaching without high expectations can limit student growth, keeping instruction at a basic level.

Before you start – fostering a high expectations mindset

Holding high expectations for students is fundamental to an equitable approach to education. Fostering equity requires educators to hold high expectations of every student’s education potential and confront any assumptions that lead to low expectations. Educators may need to reflect critically on their existing beliefs and assumptions about teaching, learning and what their students can achieve.

Low expectations can arise from a place of genuine care for students – for example, out of concern for putting too much pressure on students. The instinct to lower expectations may feel like a protective, caring response. However, decades of research show that lowering expectations can actually disadvantage students, impacting their self-confidence and their access to the full benefits of a high-quality education. Expectations are low when students are not given challenging tasks or opportunities to take risks in their learning. They are also low when teachers suggest that some students are not capable of doing the work.

Low expectations can stem from bias, conscious or unconscious. This may involve holding lower expectations based on assumptions or stereotypes about the capabilities of students from some cultural, linguistic or religious backgrounds. In line with the department’s key values and equity commitment, all department staff have a responsibility to challenge these biases and the attitudes that allow them to emerge.²

² [Our departmental values](#) guide how we go about our work and make decisions on a daily basis. They form the foundation of what it is like to work for Education and what we expect of one another. Refer also to the department’s [Anti-racism policy](#) and resources on [anti-racism education](#).

Consistently challenge all students to stretch their learning

- **Pitch learning tasks at a challenging level – that is, difficult but attainable.**

This requires checking for students’ current understanding and adjusting the teaching and learning materials so that they are not too easy and not too hard. Providing learning materials at an appropriate level of challenge helps to increase deep learning and scaffold students towards mastery. Teachers can consider the following ways to make learning challenging but attainable:

- explicitly teach students how to reflect on their own learning – for example, ask open-ended questions that prompt self-reflection (“How did you work it out?”, “Can you think of a new way to do it?”, “Tell me why ... ?”)
- space practice by leaving time for students to partially forget and then revisit core concepts
- shuffle problem types – for example, after students have learnt to solve multiple formats of maths problems, present a random mix of formats to practise on
- where possible, provide high-quality content to all students but adjust the ways they engage with it – for example, give all students a challenging English text but provide some students with additional scaffolds
- reflect on and challenge any preconceptions about each student’s capacity to engage in challenging work – this includes critical reflection for culturally responsive teaching.

- **If using smaller student groups in the classroom, use purposeful, flexible grouping based on the support students need at particular times or with particular tasks.**

This could include grouping students who need similar support for the task or grouping students of mixed ability levels. The main idea is that the groups are not a permanent or long-term arrangement. Instead, grouping is responsive to students’ varied and changing needs. Teachers can regularly revisit which students are in which groups to ensure they do not form unfair assumptions about students or restrict access to quality learning experiences (Steenbergen-Hu et al. 2016; Cullen et al. 2020).

Flexible groups can be based on many factors, such as students’ initial understandings, misconceptions or approaches to engaging with the concept. Students only work together for as long as required to complete a learning activity or develop a specific skill and groups change regularly for different activities. For example, at the start of the year, students in a mathematics class might be placed in random groups for the purpose of sharing and developing productive mathematical ways of thinking. Later in the term, grouping may be for the purpose of learning specific content. The teacher might use tiered levels of task complexity and choose groups based on students’ readiness to engage with the different levels of cognitive challenge (NCSM 2024). In this way, flexible grouping is often used alongside informal, low-stakes assessment to determine what group arrangements will best support students’ learning for the task or topic at hand.

- **Work with students and their network to create learning and support plans (🔒 staff only) for students with disability, students in out-of-home-care, students requiring behavioural support, students who require attendance and transition planning, students with a refugee background, students with English as an additional language or dialect, and newly arrived students.** Learning and support plans can be used as required. They document an individual student’s learning needs and goals, along with any specific supports or adjustments needed to fully access the curriculum and assessments. It is important to maintain high expectations for students on these plans. Adjustments are not made to the expectations but to the access and supports or adjustments a student needs to achieve the expectations. For example, supports may include access to a special and inclusive education teacher, assistive technology devices or additional time to complete assignments. Learning and support plans should be reviewed regularly to monitor the adjustment’s impact.
- **Ensure that high potential and gifted students are extended and challenged beyond their current level of mastery.** Learning and support plans can be used for supporting high potential and gifted students as well. All high potential and gifted students, regardless of their background or personal circumstances, should have access to quality learning opportunities that meet their needs and aspirations. Teachers are encouraged to engage with high potential and gifted education (HPGE) professional learning to deepen their understanding of effective practices for high potential and gifted students and the department’s HPGE policy.
- **Follow the department’s guidelines and self-reflection to develop, implement, monitor and celebrate success with personalised learning pathways (PLPs) for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.** These resources seek to ensure Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait students achieve their aspirations and realise and enjoy the benefits that schooling offers. The process centres on strong relationships, collaboration and partnerships with schools, staff and families.³ The guidelines and self-reflection support schools to foster opportunities for high expectations and ensure that the voices of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff, students, families and communities are heard and acted on in the decision-making processes that occur when developing and implementing a PLP.

Help students to set goals and monitor their progress towards achieving high expectations for learning

- **Set clear, explicit learning intentions at the beginning of each lesson and unit of work.** Learning intentions are supported by explicit success criteria (refer to the next point). When used together with success criteria, clear learning intentions help students understand what they are expected to learn, know and do. These learning intentions can be taken from the syllabus but worded in a way that is meaningful for students. Ensure that students have a visual reference point – such as on the board, in their workbook or electronically – where they can easily find the learning intentions, success criteria, activities for the lesson and key instructions. This can help students to understand the importance of what they are learning and to focus on it during the lesson.

³ 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.

Sharing learning intentions and reinforcing them during a lesson is also an explicit teaching strategy. Further guidance and examples can be found on the [Sharing learning intentions](#) webpage and in the [What Works Best explicit teaching practical guide](#).

- **Share success criteria at the beginning of each lesson and unit of work, linked to the learning intentions.** [Success criteria](#) support the learning intentions by showing students what it looks like to achieve them. One way to illustrate success criteria is to share high-quality examples of the completed task. They can be teacher-made exemplars or work samples from other students. Work with students to unpack why one response is better than others by interrogating the differences in the standard required to reach higher grade levels. For example, teachers may give students time to study an exemplar and then discuss in pairs what makes it high quality and where they see evidence of the success criteria, after explicitly teaching students how to do this.

Teachers and students can also use a well-constructed rubric to determine degrees of quality.⁴ Well-constructed rubrics provide rich information about the extent to which the success criteria have been achieved by individual learners (Lyna et al. 2016). This can support students to reflect on their own progress towards achieving the learning intentions and meeting high expectations.

Sharing high-quality teaching and learning materials

Teachers do not have to develop all exemplars, rubrics and other teaching materials from scratch. The [Lesson Library](#) (🔒 staff only) is the department's online platform for syllabus-aligned curriculum resources for NSW public school teachers. New lessons will be added over time. Many schools also use professional networks where teachers can access and share high-quality resources. The department's [Statewide Staffrooms](#) are online collaborative spaces for expert advice, resources and professional learning. Teachers in regional, rural and remote schools can particularly benefit from the platform, as it provides opportunities to connect with a wider community of educators and access a range of high-quality resources that may not be available locally. Refer to the [What Works Best collaboration practical guide](#) for a range of ideas to consider when engaging in teacher collaboration practices.

4 The [What Works Best evidence guide](#) chapter on assessment and its accompanying [practical guide](#) offer more information on effective rubrics. Refer also to the NSW Department of Education's (2025) [Sharing learning intentions and success criteria – technique guide](#) (PDF 660 KB).

- **Help students to set growth goals.** Growth goal setting involves striving to meet personally set academic challenges, aiming to outperform one's previous best efforts or performance. It has been shown to improve student achievement and engagement, particularly for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and with low prior achievement (Martin et al. 2022). Students should know that they will be supported to achieve their growth goals. Teachers can work with students to help them to set their goals and show them the path to those goals. Students who have teachers with high expectations and who think that they can attain a goal are more confident and motivated to work towards it.
- **For effective growth goals, teachers can work with students to develop goals with the following characteristics:**
 - **focused on self-improvement** rather than competing with other students
 - **specific** to the actions to be taken and what will be achieved
 - **challenging**, meaning the goal is both difficult and attainable
 - **positive** framing to encourage effort and motivation
 - **time-bound** to help students break long-term goals into smaller, short-term goals, keeping them engaged with working towards their objectives
 - **measurable** and/or assessable to enable regular monitoring and feedback that shows students their progress towards the goal.

For further guidance and worked examples, refer to the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) resource [Growth goal setting – What Works Best in practice](#) (2021).

- **Use regular, low-stakes assessment and feedback, as described in the [What Works Best practical guides on assessment and effective feedback](#), and the department's [guide to effective assessment practices](#).** Regularly checking students' understanding is important for identifying their strengths, knowledge and skills, and helps teachers make on-balance judgements of student learning. Teachers need this information to help students set appropriate growth goals and monitor their progress. Effective feedback provides students with actionable information on their learning and what they can do to improve and achieve their goals.

Create a positive learning environment

- **Get to know students and the interests, strengths and experiences they bring to the classroom.** Positive teacher–student relationships help create learning environments that are supportive, culturally inclusive and productive. This is critical to building an effective culture of high expectations – without it, high expectations can turn into high stress for some students. By getting to know each student on a personal level, teachers demonstrate to the student that they care for them and want them to succeed. Practices for building positive teacher–student relationships to create a supportive learning environment are described in the [What Works Best wellbeing practical guide](#).

- **Create a safe space where all students feel comfortable to take risks, make mistakes, accept feedback and ask questions to clarify their thinking.** This involves facilitating and modelling classroom expectations about how to be a respectful, responsible and collaborative class member. For example, teachers can use regular, low-stakes checks for understanding as opportunities to normalise making mistakes. This could involve facilitating discussions around common misconceptions or tricky concepts. Encouraging students to share their thought processes (for example, by asking “What led you to this answer?”) can help with identifying misunderstandings, allowing opportunities to overcome common mistakes or to highlight more efficient paths to an answer. Showing curiosity about the thinking behind their answers can help students see that their ideas are valid while also clarifying their reasoning. It shows students that it is safe to make mistakes and take risks in their learning.

For further practical guidance on creating a safe, respectful learning environment, refer to Peddie et al. (2024) and the [What Works Best classroom management practical guide](#).

Establish clear and consistent expectations for learning and behaviour

- **High expectations for behaviour are important for students’ readiness to learn at school.**⁵ The practice involves explicitly teaching students the norms, processes and behavioural expectations that set students up to engage and succeed in learning. Establishing expectations at the beginning of the school year provides predictability for students and supports them to be ready for learning at school as quickly as possible. Teachers can work with students to establish and explain classroom rules, routines and expectations for behaviour that fit within the whole-school classroom management policies. For example, some teachers develop a set of rules and review them with the class, introducing each rule clearly and explaining why they are important for a fun, productive and safe learning environment. The rules are best displayed visually in the classroom, such as on posters or checklists, and regularly reinforced. To make it easier for students to remember and follow them, have the fewest number of rules necessary for maintaining a respectful and productive learning environment.

The Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) framework can support high expectations for behaviour and explicit teaching of positive behaviour. For more practical guidance and examples, refer to the department’s [PBL resources](#) and [eLearning](#).

5 High expectations for student behaviour is a distinct concept from high expectations for student learning, but the practices reinforce each other. When teachers have high expectations for learning, they manage behaviour positively and establish norms and routines that help to create a positive learning environment where students can engage with and achieve challenging goals.

- **Model expected behaviours in the classroom, such as being punctual, showing respect for other students and school property and coming to every lesson prepared.** Demonstrating what the rules and procedures look like helps students to understand what is expected of them and reinforces the behavioural standards.
- **Recognise appropriate behaviour, particularly when students are first learning it as a new skill.** Positive, behaviour-specific feedback helps students to learn what expected behaviour looks like and can encourage them to engage in those behaviours in future – for example, “I notice lots of you remembered to raise your hands today. That really helped our discussion to include lots of people’s ideas.” Younger students may respond well to contingent praise – for example, “Thank you for sitting up straight and having your eyes on me, Brianna” – while older students may prefer private acknowledgement. Behavioural expectations can also be reinforced with quick responses such as simple nonverbal gestures and facial expressions. Effective reinforcement considers students’ interests, developmental levels and cultural differences. It can be useful to compile a classroom reinforcement menu, with input from students, to provide variety and allow students to select their preferred reinforcer.⁶
- **Consistently address inappropriate behaviour.** Deliver warnings and consequences calmly and consistently to all students. Consistency helps to uphold the established expectations and signals to students that the rules are practiced fairly for everyone. The exception might be if a student needs specific behavioural accommodations detailed in a learning and support plan.

Collaborate with families to recognise the impact of high expectations

- **Engage families in active discussions of their child’s work and educational goals.** Opportunities for meaningful dialogue can help families to understand and appreciate the expectations the school has of their child and help teachers understand more about a student’s experiences outside of the school gates and how these may impact their learning. For example, teachers can ask family members what success looks like to them – what do they value, and what do they want to see their child achieve? By bringing curiosity and a willingness to learn to these engagements, teachers can enhance their understanding of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Regular open classroom time can be scheduled in primary schools. In secondary schools, open days can be used to display student work and give families additional opportunities to meet in person with their child’s teachers.⁷

⁶ Refer to the NSW Department of Education’s (2025) [Positive behaviour support: reinforcement \(PDF 260 KB\)](#) for further practical guidance.

⁷ Refer to CESE’s (2025) [Sense of belonging research series](#) for illustrations of how NSW public schools have engaged families and communities to support student learning in their school context.

- **Regularly update families on their child's progress and learning goals as well as learning expectations.** Teachers can use guidance from learning and support plans and PLPs to help with this process. The information provided may guide the educational expectations of families and encourage or inform their at-home engagement with their child's learning, such as in family discussions about expectations and aspirations. It is important that regular communication from the school includes positive updates while also being clear about what students have and have not achieved, and addresses the next steps in learning. When families believe that they only hear from school when there is a problem it can negatively impact the family-teacher relationship and contribute to family disengagement. Communication methods may include meetings in person, emails, or phone or video calls. For example, some schools do 'good news calls', which involve a quick phone call or email to a student's parent or carer to let them know something positive the student has done or worked on, such as working really hard on a challenging task, helping a classmate or improving on a particular behaviour. The method of communication depends on the student and community backgrounds, considering factors such as different levels of internet connectivity, community experiences of education, and literacy levels. Some teachers and school leaders aim to do a total of 2 to 5 good news calls or emails a week and comment that it is a helpful way to celebrate successes and build relationships with families.

School leaders can foster a school-wide culture of high expectations

School leaders can help to build a culture of high expectations across the whole school. This includes having high standards for teaching and leadership, fostered by a balance between accountability and trust. School leaders with high expectations also ensure that school systems, subject offerings, programs and processes are in place to make the high expectations achievable for all students and staff. Cultures of high expectations are often driven by a supportive, collaborative school leadership team who actively foster collective efficacy and aspiration across the school and community.

To help establish a whole-school culture of high expectations, school leaders can work with teachers and teaching support staff to use the same scaffolds and technical language across stages, faculties (where appropriate) and the whole school. The consistency in scaffolds and language helps ensure that all students are provided with clear expectations. For example, in English, this could be an agreed paragraph scaffold. In mathematics, it could be a requirement that all students show their working out in a consistent way from the start of Year 7. The requirement is not in itself a practice of high expectations, but the consistency helps students to understand the expectations as they transition between classes and stages. The shared language among school staff helps teachers to provide students with increasingly challenging learning experiences as they move from one teacher to another and progress through the curriculum.

School leaders may also plan how school staff will connect with families to support their child's learning at home. School staff can play a vital role in facilitating family engagement by providing advice, tools and information about how students learn and how to set up home learning environments that are consistent with school expectations. For example, advice to families could include explaining the importance of establishing routines and time-defined tasks which are broken up by short breaks when students are studying at home.

The connections between high expectations, the other What Works Best themes and the school's strategic priorities can be complex to understand and action. Implementation is enabled by structured professional learning that supports staff to use the research and evidence-informed initiatives collaboratively for sustained whole-school improvement. School leaders can use the department's [School Excellence Framework \(SEF\)](#) to establish clear goals and strategies that promote high expectations for student learning and staff performance, ensuring a consistent focus on excellence throughout the school community.

Other What Works Best 2025 resources on high expectations

- [Evidence guide](#) – Chapter 1: High expectations
- [Illustration of practice](#) – High expectations at Coonamble Public School

Additional resources

- CESE (2022) [Strong strides together – meeting the educational goals for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students](#)
- CESE (2021) [Growth goal setting – What Works Best in practice](#)
- NSW Department of Education (2025) [Personalised learning pathways guidelines](#)
- NSW Department of Education (n.d.) [Anti-racism action in schools](#)
- NSW Department of Education (n.d.) [Behaviour support toolkit](#)
- NSW Department of Education (n.d.) [Explicit teaching strategies](#)
- NSW Department of Education (n.d.) [Positive Behaviour for Learning \(PBL\)](#)
- Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) (2024) [Foundational classroom management resources handbook](#)
- AERO (2023) [High expectations for student behaviour: their role in classroom management](#)
- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2024) [Strengthening parent engagement to improve student outcomes](#)

Reflection questions

Teachers

- What do high expectations look like and feel like in my classroom? What would my students say? What would their families say?
- Am I making fair assumptions about what my students are capable of?
- How do I ensure that all students have access to quality learning opportunities that meet their needs and aspirations? For example, how do I know if the tasks I set are appropriate, challenging and attainable for students?
- How do I support students to set, monitor, improve and achieve their growth goals?
- How do I use purposeful, flexible grouping arrangements to support students' varied and changing needs?
- How do I provide a positive learning environment that supports high expectations for students?
- How well do staff in our school collaborate in culturally responsive ways with families and communities to develop shared expectations?
- How do I collaborate with students and families to provide the appropriate access, support, adjustments or extensions their child needs to achieve expectations?

School leaders

- What strategies are in place to set clear and consistent expectations for learning and behaviour at our school?
- Do all students in our school have the access and supports they need to meet high expectations?
- How are staff at our school supported to develop and implement effective teaching strategies that enable students to achieve ambitious and challenging learning goals? What professional development opportunities could we provide to further strengthen teachers' knowledge and skills?
- As a leadership team, how do we plan opportunities for school staff to work with families to ensure consistent expectations of their children between home and school?
- How does our school connect with the system – for example, through our director, educational leadership (DEL) – to support a system-wide approach to improve high expectations?

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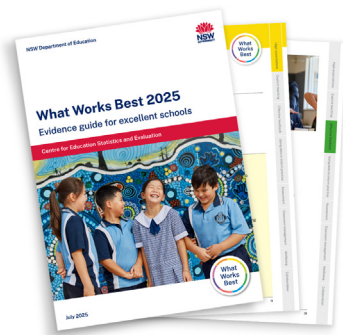
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Access the full suite of What Works Best resources

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

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