

# Encouraging a sense of belonging and connectedness in secondary schools



**A positive sense of belonging at school has fundamental benefits for children and young people and flow-on benefits for their learning and engagement with school. This guide makes recommendations based on the best available research evidence on fostering a sense of belonging in school environments.**

Sense of belonging to one's school is referred to as school connectedness and is the extent to which students feel a part of their school and feel valued and cared for by their school community!

### Related frameworks

#### Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

Focus Area 1.2 (Understand how students learn)  
 Focus Area 4.1 (Support student participation)  
 Focus Area 4.4 (Maintain student safety)  
 Focus Area 7.3 (Engage with the parents/carers)

#### Australian Professional Standard for Principals

Professional Practice 1 (Leading teaching and learning)  
 Professional Practice 3 (Leading improvement, innovation, and change)  
 Professional Practice 5 (Engaging and working with the community)

#### Australian Student Wellbeing Framework

Support: Wellbeing and support for positive behaviour  
 Inclusion: Inclusive and connected

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) has synthesised the most relevant evidence-based practices using rigorous methods in creating this guide. We have rated these sources of information against our [Standards of evidence](#), focusing on evidence generated in an Australian context wherever possible. Examples are supported by critical reflection questions and snapshots of practice to extend your knowledge and practice.

Some examples presented may not apply in all contexts, may be more suitable for lower secondary students than upper secondary students (and vice versa) and may look different across different content areas. Please make reasonable adjustments where necessary to ensure full access and participation for all students.

## Using this guide in your classroom or school

We recommend you integrate the practices discussed in this guide into everyday classroom and whole school practices rather than treat them as standalone practices. You can support belonging in all interactions with your students using a variety of approaches presented in this guide. These approaches are designed to be both incorporated into and complement instructional practice, recognising that learning and wellbeing are mutually reinforcing.

You and your school may already implement many of the evidence-based practices presented in the guide. Integrating further practices will support the work you are already doing to ensure students are best able to learn. To make the most of recommendations, align your classroom and whole-school practices.

## Using this guide as a school leader

If you are a leader in your school, you can use this guide to promote collaborative discussion and reflection within teaching teams. The practices described can serve as a point of conversation to build shared understandings of how to enhance students' sense of belonging and build greater cohesion in the use of these practices at both the classroom and the whole school level.

You can also use the reflective questions to encourage teachers to collaboratively compare the approaches within this guide to existing classroom and whole school practices. Through reflection, teachers can identify which strategies are well-established and set common goals for strengthening or embedding practices that require further consideration.

## Benefits for students

A positive sense of belonging at school has fundamental benefits for students, including feeling that:

- their teachers and peers like, value and accept them
- the curriculum is interesting and relevant
- they are capable of succeeding at school
- their cultural identity is welcome and valued
- they can 'be themselves' within appropriate boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

A positive relationship with the school community can shape a student's emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement with schooling and influence academic outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Students who experience positive peer relationships in school are up to 2 months ahead in their NAPLAN scores 2 years later than those who don't experience positive peer relationships.<sup>4</sup> Benefits for learning and engagement at school include:

- lower absenteeism
- higher levels of effort, interest and motivation
- positive homework behaviour
- being more likely to like school
- trusting and respecting their teachers
- enjoying challenging learning activities
- being concerned about and helping others.

## Evidence review

Our systematic review of available research found strong evidence of the practices that support students' connectedness to school. Positive relationships with teachers and peers improve students' sense of belonging. Studies showed that school structures and policies can facilitate connectedness between students and the school. The research also indicates that school leadership's commitment towards improving students' belonging is vital.

Research into practices that improve the wellbeing of students is relatively new and not as well explored as other learning areas. It also includes a larger focus on qualitative and international research. Further research is required to test whole school practices and their impact on belonging and connectedness for students and how these practices translate into improved academic and learning outcomes. The evidence base would also benefit from more studies with larger sample sizes to further understand the impact of belonging on students' learning outcomes.

# Belonging and connectedness in practice

AERO evidence reliability key:

● = Medium confidence

● = High confidence

● = Very high confidence



## Classroom approaches

### ● Experiencing positive relationships with teachers

**Teacher support** has been shown to have the strongest effect on school belonging for secondary school students as it meets their needs for relatedness, care and connection to others.<sup>5</sup> This includes promoting mutual respect, care, encouragement, friendliness, fairness and autonomy.<sup>6</sup> Examples of this in the classroom include a teacher who praises good behaviour and work, is available for personal and academic support, expects students to do their best, and scaffolds learning to help them achieve.<sup>7</sup>

**Building relationships** by connecting with students in and out of class can help students feel like they belong at school.<sup>8</sup> These relationships can also help students feel more comfortable sharing problems and seeking help when needed. In the classroom, teachers can build relationships with students by being empathetic and fair, taking an interest in their lives, and having an open-door policy within appropriate professional boundaries.<sup>9</sup>

**Mutual respect** has been positively associated with a sense of school belonging as it encourages classroom engagement, helps students focus on the learning task, and fosters a sense of security.<sup>10</sup> Teachers can promote respect by using informational, non-controlling language which conveys a sense of choice and flexibility (such as 'you may' or 'would you like to' rather than 'should') and constructive criticism.<sup>11</sup> They may also promote mutual respect in the classroom by modelling respectful behaviour (such as using polite responses like 'please' or 'thank you'), explicitly stating classroom norms, and encouraging students to interact respectfully.

### ● Fostering relationships between students

**Peer support** significantly affects students' belonging as it meets their needs for relatedness and acceptance, providing them with a sense that they can rely on others.<sup>12</sup> This can come from trust and closeness with peers, academic support (for example, clarifying teacher directions or comparing schoolwork), acceptance and social support.<sup>13</sup> Teachers can support peer relationships by building time for peer support in their lessons.

**Shared lunches**, where students bring their meals and eat together, have been shown to improve relationships between students.<sup>14</sup> These informal gatherings fostered connectedness by showing students the similarities and differences between their values (known as common humanity), encouraging sharing, enabling inclusive participation, and facilitating experiences of diversity. Where sharing food isn't possible, sharing the space (for example, having a picnic on the oval) is another way that students can share the occasion and strengthen social relationships.<sup>15</sup>

## ● Employing teaching practices that encourage students to participate in the work

Classroom practices that ensure students feel connected to and motivated within their learning environment can foster a sense of belonging, as students feel valued and supported.<sup>16</sup>

Strategies that have been shown to improve belonging include teachers' use of media to engage students and make their lessons active; frequent changes in seating arrangements to ensure students engage with a variety of students in the class; and providing students opportunities to work in pairs or groups.<sup>17</sup> Group work should be underpinned by a strong foundation of guided instruction.

**Classroom rules and routines** promote a 'team' mentality. Equal enforcement of classroom rules can create a sense of community for students.<sup>18</sup> Rules and routines should be clear, orderly, consistent, in line with whole-school policies and adapted when needed. Practices such as ensuring everyone understands a concept or assignment before moving on so that no one is left behind can help students feel as though their learning needs are acknowledged, fostering belonging.<sup>19</sup>

## Reflection questions for teachers

- How can you monitor students' sense of belonging in the classroom across the school year?
- How can you adjust your practices to ensure students feel connected and motivated in your learning environment?
- How will you connect with students outside of the classroom within appropriate boundaries?
- How can you model respectful behaviour for your students?
- How will you incorporate the practices from this guide, in a way which does not undermine learning?
- How will your activities foster belonging for diverse students, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disabilities, and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?





## Whole school approaches

### ● Ensuring supportive school structures and policies

School structures and policies can impact how secure a student may feel at school, their sense of fairness, and how connected they feel to their environment.<sup>20</sup> Upholding a **positive school culture** through policies, high academic expectations and a nurturing ethos were key elements that led to students' feeling more connected.<sup>21</sup> **Zero-tolerance bullying** procedures that support both the bullies and the bullied were also essential to school policies that drove students' connectedness.<sup>22</sup>

A positive school culture with **high academic expectations** also influences students' sense of belonging as every child is supported to learn and succeed in ways that reflect and extend their unique capabilities and trajectory.<sup>23</sup> This supports students' needs for competence and promotes motivation and engagement.<sup>24</sup> This approach should be underpinned by **high-quality teacher-student relationships**.

**Commitment from leadership** towards a positive culture is crucial for all students to feel a sense of belonging.<sup>25</sup> Examples of this commitment at the whole-school level include drawing on students' voices, developing staff confidence and competence in fostering positive relationships with students, and ensuring all staff are focused on improving wellbeing.

The school's **physical aspects** can also impact students' feelings of safety and belonging. A clean and aesthetically pleasing environment can contribute to the school culture.<sup>26</sup>

### ● Providing dedicated opportunities for pastoral support

Home class groups and tutorial systems can provide **supportive environments** for students, fostering relationships with teachers and peers who might not be in their classes. School leaders can encourage teachers to provide opportunities for general pastoral support to students so that they are available for personal and academic support.<sup>27</sup> Referral pathways for dedicated support services should be clear and utilised when needed.

### ● Fostering positive child-family relationships

Schools should consider ways of involving families as part of a whole-school approach towards fostering belonging. **Information sessions** and effective communication between school and home through bulletins or newsletters can create a supportive network for students.<sup>28</sup> Two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning is an effective way of drawing on the knowledge of both families and teachers about student learning needs and achievements.



## ● Promoting peer connection through activities

Peer friendships help students generate a school identity, where they feel part of something and the community, developing a sense of belonging.<sup>29</sup>

Schools can promote peer friendships through school camps, **extracurricular activities** (for example, activities such as musical or sporting clubs) and sports days.<sup>30</sup> These activities help strengthen existing friendships and provide opportunities to develop new ones by connecting with people they don't regularly talk with at school.

**Peer mentoring** has also been shown to promote connectedness at school whereby students serve as role models, sharing knowledge, skills, and expertise and offering personal support.<sup>31</sup> Mentoring can include shared activities, guidance, information or encouragement.<sup>32</sup> To be most effective, mentoring should be high dosage (meeting at least once per week), long-term (lasting at least one year) and include a mix of social and academic activities.<sup>33</sup>

---

### Reflection questions for leaders

- How might you include wellbeing, with a focus on belonging, into your existing policies?
- How will your school policies and processes foster belonging for diverse students, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disabilities, and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?
- What types of supports are in place to help all families and staff communicate with each other about students' wellbeing?
- How can you assess that your approach is working, using evidence to inform your understanding?

## Snapshots of practice



### In the classroom

Mrs S has a secret handshake with every student. At the start of the term, she invites each student to develop a handshake or greeting they would like her to use with them at the start of every class. This might be a fist bump, high-five, hand clap routine or dance move. It takes a bit of practice for Mrs S to remember them all, but the students feel noticed before the lesson starts. They also enjoy a laugh together as Mrs S makes mistakes when she is trying to remember them all. Mrs S finds the secret handshake and the laughs are a great way to break the ice and connect with each student before class. Some students also use the handshake to greet Mrs S during the day as they see her in the corridor or yard. These connections assist the students to feel seen both within and beyond the classroom.



### Whole school level

As part of Wyndcroft College's approach to pastoral care, students have a designated place where they check in each morning with a staff member who welcomes them positively and with care. For all students, particularly those who arrive late and may be experiencing challenges at home or feelings of disengagement from school, checking in with a caring adult provides a positive point of connection before they start classes for the day. These moments of check-in provide an opportunity for staff to monitor how the student is feeling and progressing. They offer students the chance to talk about the challenges and successes they may be experiencing with an adult who genuinely cares about their wellbeing. Learning more about the students' wellbeing, in turn, enables staff to offer help and support where required.

## Next steps

Consider which of the scenarios in the table below most closely resembles your current practices.

<b>We're already using some or all of the approaches</b>	<b>We're just starting to think about how we can improve belonging for students</b>	<b>We're using other approaches not covered in this practice guide</b>
<p>That's great – the evidence suggests these are good approaches to try. You could focus on embedding, sustaining and monitoring quality practice. For example, you could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• explicitly consider implementation barriers and enablers</li> <li>• focus on tailoring your approaches to meet the diverse needs of students</li> <li>• share your approaches, challenges and successes with other colleagues or school leaders – this could include modelling practices for your peers</li> <li>• monitor and review how these approaches are going (for example, by collecting student data and consulting with colleagues and students about what is and what is not working, and what adjustments could be made to improve outcomes).</li> </ul>	<p>Student belonging has been linked with positive outcomes for student learning, so it's great that you're looking for strategies to try. You could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• select which of the approaches you could first focus on to meet these needs</li> <li>• identify the elements of school connectedness that you already do but could improve, and consider how you can develop staff capacity in these areas</li> <li>• emphasise the importance of a whole-of-school approach to increasing school connectedness to all staff</li> <li>• assist school personnel to engage with the practices covered in this guide – how can school leadership support the integration of these practices into everyday work?</li> <li>• browse <a href="#">AERO's resources</a>.</li> </ul>	<p>Wellbeing covers a range of elements and can involve many different activities. Your approach may not yet have been tested by researchers or may have been tested in studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria for this guide. You could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reflect on your approaches and why you are doing them – how do they link to learning?</li> <li>• continue to monitor how your approach is going – is anything not working? Use data to support your understanding</li> <li>• try some of the approaches mentioned in this guide</li> <li>• review the evidence for your approach by using AERO's <a href="#">Research reflection guide</a>.</li> </ul>

## References

To provide feedback on this guide or view further information, including full references and additional readings, visit [AERO's website](#).

---

- 1 Rowe and Stewart 2011
- 2 Bagdi and Vacca 2005
- 3 Dix et al. 2020
- 4 Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2019
- 5 Kiefer, Alley and Ellerbrock 2015
- 6 Allen et al. 2018
- 7 Allen et al. 2018; Greenwood and Kelly 2019
- 8 Kiefer, Alley and Ellerbrock 2015
- 9 Greenwood and Kelly 2019
- 10 Kiefer, Alley and Ellerbrock 2015
- 11 Kiefer, Alley and Ellerbrock 2015
- 12 Kiefer, Alley and Ellerbrock 2015
- 13 Allen et al. 2018
- 14 Rowe and Stewart 2011, Neely, Walton, and Stephens 2015
- 15 Neely, Walton, and Stephens 2015
- 16 Greenwood and Kelly 2019
- 17 Greenwood and Kelly 2019; Keyes 2019
- 18 Keyes 2019
- 19 Keyes 2019
- 20 Allen et al. 2018
- 21 Greenwood and Kelly 2019
- 22 Greenwood and Kelly 2019
- 23 Greenwood and Kelly 2019
- 24 Kiefer, Alley and Ellerbrock 2015
- 25 Greenwood and Kelly 2019
- 26 Greenwood and Kelly 2019
- 27 Allen et al. 2018
- 28 Allen et al. 2018
- 29 Greenwood and Kelly 2019
- 30 Greenwood and Kelly 2019
- 31 Gordon, Downey and Bangert 2013
- 32 Gordon, Downey and Bangert 2013
- 33 Gordon, Downey and Bangert 2013