## Positive climate for learning RESEARCH evidence base

Establishing a positive climate for learning, including supporting student health, wellbeing and student engagement sets the foundation for student learning and academic performance. A positive learning climate is characterised by shared values, trust, high student motivation, a professional teaching culture and strong partnerships. School leaders need to dedicate time and resources to building a positive climate for learning within their school community. Common strategies for building a positive school climate include school wide positive behaviour supports, social emotional learning and a strong focus on student intellectual engagement. The engagement of teachers and school leadership are vital elements in achieving student engagement and sustaining school improvement.

### Health and wellbeing

A whole-school approach to health and wellbeing is integral to positive student engagement, learning, growth, relationships and achievement. Wellbeing is a multi-dimensional construct, comprising elements of physical and mental health alongside subjective dimensions of happiness and satisfaction with life. Evidence shows that higher levels of wellbeing are linked to higher academic achievement, school completion, better overall mental and physical health and a more pro-social and responsible lifestyle. The [Australian Student Wellbeing Framework](https://www.education.gov.au/national-safe-schools-framework-0), launched by the Australian Government in 2018, emphasises five priorities for promoting wellbeing in schools: leadership of principals and school leaders, inclusion of the community, student voice, partnerships and support for school staff, students and families.

Effective wellbeing interventions are explicitly taught by the trained classroom teacher, delivered to groups or classes of students, appropriate for students’ developmental stage, communicated to the community, manageable to deliver alongside the curriculum and can be short (within a term) (Dix et al., 2020). Wellbeing interventions focused on belonging and engagement are found to have the greatest impact on student academic achievement, while social-emotional programs were associated with better literacy outcomes and those that encouraged physical activity, exercise and relaxation with better numeracy outcomes (Dix et al., 2020).

Extensive international research supports the effectiveness of social and emotional learning (SEL), particularly for disadvantaged students with lower academic performance (Evidence for Learning, 2019a; Taylor et al, 2017 and Voight & Nation, 2016). SEL programs have positive impacts on students’ social skills, self-image, academic achievement and mental health and reduce antisocial behaviour and substance abuse. The Wallace Foundation identified five key features of effective SEL programs: supportive contexts, setting realistic goals, teacher competency, family-school-community partnerships, and planning that targets a key set of skills across the multiple domains of students’ development (Jones et al., 2017). These domains include emotional, social/interpersonal, cognitive, regulation and executive function skills. In addition, parent involvement in SEL programs significantly increases their effectiveness and programs delivered outside-of-school time are more effective when they ‘fit’ with students schedules, the curriculum and other structures already in place (Jones, et al., 2017; Sklad et al., 2012).

Effective schools focus on the quality of intervention programs, which is more important than the frequency or duration. For example, attendance monitoring over time is less effective than engagement strategies designed around the individual student. Continuing professional development for teachers is also important to ensure uptake of evidence-based strategies to support students (Dilley, 2009; Goldberg, et al., 2019; Kraft, et al., 2018; Wilson & Tanner-Smith, 2013).School connections to social services which provide additional support for student health and wellbeing also contribute to improving student achievement (Moore et al., 2013).

Contemporary approaches to health promotion in schools go beyond developing educational topics and embedding these in health education curricula. In order to maximise the wellbeing and health outcomes of young people, schools are encouraged to ensure that health promoting activities can be carried out in a positive social and physical environment that effectively links parents, youth, and the wider community. Research has consistently demonstrated the wellbeing benefits for children and adolescents of participating in higher levels of physical activity (Gerber, et al., 2017; Hegberg & Tone, 2015; Marks, 2010). Healthy physical activity can be encouraged by a wide variety of play spaces and an investment in sport equipment. Unhealthy behaviours such as bullying, and smoking can be constrained by limiting unsupervised spaces and the consistent application of school rules by teachers and leaders (Bonell, et al., 2013).

### Setting expectations and promoting inclusion

In schools with sustained improvement, staff have strong expectations of students and students have high expectations of themselves. High expectations of students have been linked with greater self-esteem and confidence in students, which in turns improves student achievement (Brophy, 2013). Setting expectations of students is highly complex and requires knowing students well, understanding the difficulties of some students’ homelives, holding a belief that all students can learn, reinforcing teachers’ sense of efficacy and promoting a sense of pride and self-respect. It is important for expectations and rules to be applied consistently by individual teachers and across the school. Students that teachers expect to do well tend to achieve better, while pupils who are expected to do badly tend to fulfil their teachers’ expectations as well (Muijs et al., 2014; OECD, 2013; Robinson et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2016).

The communication of expected standards across all levels of the school community (teachers, students, parents/carers/kin, administrators and other stakeholders) and accountability for these standards is critical in building a culture of high expectations. Students’ drive, motivation and self-confidence are essential if students are to fulfil their potential and may be impacted by the behaviour and performance of other students in their class of the school (Hartman, 2018; Okilwa & Barnett, 2017; Liu, 2017).

Strong student-teacher relationships increase teachers’ expectations and beliefs in student capabilities and are important in preventing disengagement from school and risk-taking behaviour. Effective schools ensure that every child has a secure, positive and ongoing relationship with at least one staff member. Negative relationships can make students less happy about coming to school or participating in class. Teachers can improve relationships by showing they understand and care about individual students and trying to see student perspectives. (Hattie, 2009; Jamal et al., 2013; Nicholson & Putwain, 2015).

Feeling safe in school powerfully promotes student learning and healthy development. In contrast, exposure to bullying has been linked to a variety of risk factors including poorer academic performance, fear-based absenteeism and poorer mental and general health (Arseneault, 2017; Glew et al., 2005; Strom et al., 2013).The cultivation of an inclusive learning environment where students and staff align their behaviour with the school’s vision, goals and values enables students and staff to focus on teaching and learning.

Research indicates that school connectedness, supportive educators, anti-bullying policies, inclusive curricula, professional learning on inclusion and practices that engage students in school activities are beneficial for building an inclusive school culture (Bonell et al., 2013; Johns et al, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013). A whole-school approach to violence prevention that develops and sustains a culture of respect and healthy relationships significantly improves school safety. Additionally, reductions in bullying have been linked to classroom rules and management, parent training and home-school communication and increased playground supervision (Ttofi et al., 2011).

### Intellectual engagement and self-awareness

Fostering a school climate that encourages learning and high levels of student social, intellectual and institutional engagement has been found to improve student performance. Student engagement and a positive learning climate are mutually reinforcing, with each building the other and driving school improvement. Students’ intellectual engagement is a strong focus in effective schools, where the significance or purpose of their learning is clearly articulated, and students are engaged in achieving challenging learning goals (Bradford & Clarke 2015; Dogan 2017).

Strategies that sustain students’ intellectual engagement include innovative flexible programming, adaptive teaching practice for differentiation, challenging options for student learning that involve substantive dialogue with teachers and peers, real world contexts for relevant curriculum and effective learning time. Inquiry-based learning can build individualised competency-based experiences and encourage students to explore new ideas. Likewise, successful reengagement of disengaged students includes student autonomy, appropriate challenge, positive classroom climate and strong staff-student relationships (Bills & Giles 2016; Nicholson & Putwain, 2015; Rennie et al., 2018).

Several systematic reviews and meta-analyses have consistently found strategies related to metacognition and self-regulation to have large positive impacts on student learning (Dignath et al., 2008; Donker et la., 2014; Goldberg et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2017). Self‑regulated learners are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and can motivate themselves to engage in, and improve, their learning. Metacognitive strategies improve learning across all domains or subjects and are effective from primary school ages onwards. The greatest positive learning impacts were found for interventions that combined the instruction of different types of strategies and had consideration of motivational factors when investigating self-regulated learning (Donker et al., 2014; Dignath, et al., 2008; Evidence for Learning, 2019b).

**Empowering students and building school pride**

A wealth of contemporary literature supports that student voice and agency strategies drive school improvement in a broad range of academic and non-academic outcomes (Baroutsis, et al., 2016; Bills & Giles, 2016; Fielding, 2001; Gonzalez, et al., 2017; Holdsworth, 2005; Mitra, 2018). Studies have shown that student agency activities positively impact on student learning and engagement in school, which drives improved academic outcomes (Mitra & Goss, 2009). Teachers can better understand which pedagogical approaches encourage and support student agency through analysing student feedback and providing students the opportunity to learn from each other. Student voice is discussed in the literature as both an avenue to improve student outcomes and for students to identify opportunities for school improvement and work with teachers and leaders towards solutions. Student participation and leadership in school reform efforts is intrinsic to student engagement and has been argued to be fundamental to sustained school success (Andrews, 2007; Crowther et al., 2001).

Students can be included in school improvement teams to assist in planning and implementation of change to ensure that prioritised focus areas, school culture building and pedagogical approaches respond to students’ feedback, perspectives and ideas. ‘Authentic’ student voice is not simply to provide data for others to make decisions, but it should encourage young people’s active participation in shared decision making and consequent actions. Humour is also identified, within student voice, as an important element in engaging students and building a positive learning climate (Baroutsis, et al., 2016; Fielding, 2001; Gonzalez, et al., 2017; Holdsworth, 2005; Mitra, 2018).

Acknowledging that all students can succeed, and recognising student achievement builds school pride and drives sustained school improvement. Effective schools recognise student achievements in a wide variety of areas and for students of all abilities and have leaders who make an effort to get to know their students and build a thorough understanding of all activities taking place in the school (Ainscow et al., 2016; Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016; Bonell, et al., 2013).

### Case studies of schools excelling in student voice, agency and leadership

* + - [Aspendale Primary School](https://vimeo.com/361190629/6c777b06f6): Student agency was enacted when students and staff worked collaboratively to plan learning and instructional approaches that are responsive to students’ interests and needs
    - [Blackburn Lake Primary School](https://vimeo.com/361197048/5ed3490a96): To move students from fixed to growth mindsets, teachers collaborated with students to co-design a mathematics program in Year 5
    - [Canterbury Primary School](http://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/?8XSPGJ): Year 6 Canterbury PS teacher Carly Pluck embarked on an innovative project with her students, where they created a radio program and invited celebrities to be interviewed, using social media to reflect on the process
    - [Clifton Springs Primary School](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/classrooms/Pages/approachesstudentvoicecliftonsprings.aspx): Clifton Springs Primary School's dedication to empowering student voice has led to major changes in the school, and a win at the VicSRC Awards for 2018 Primary Schools VicSRC of the Year. Student Representative Council (SRC) has become an important part of running the school, empowering student voices and leading to major changes in the school
    - [Diamond Valley Special Development School](https://vimeo.com/361197818/f964049dc6): The school-wide implementation of an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) system has amplified student voice across the school
    - [Ivanhoe East Primary School](https://vimeo.com/361198715/2e1737cbce): The co-design of a new ‘school pride and school connectedness’ unit led to new planning processes which engaged students and teachers in an authentic teaching and learning partnership
    - [Lalor East Primary School](https://vimeo.com/361199646/33636cdf38): Active engagement of students in the co-design of an instructional model lead to improved learning outcomes through a concerted focus on students’ needs, interests and abilities
    - [Rosanna Primary School](https://vimeo.com/361199646/33636cdf38): Developed the Deep Learning Protocols which define what deep learning looks like and provide an agreed language and focus for  discussing learning in the classroom
    - [Roxburgh College](https://player.vimeo.com/video/293492766): Implemented Learning Walks to elicit insights from the student and teacher perspective is described. The school is genuinely generating and triangulating feedback
    - [Traralgon Senior College](https://vimeo.com/361202705/3e5579ba09): Student Voice Teams and Student Action Teams were the key enablers of several initiatives including co-designed learning behaviours, curriculum co-design and student participation in school decision-making.

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