

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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# Cecil Hills High School

Every student is known, valued and cared for  
in our schools

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



You can see that the students here are settled, they interact well with their teachers, and they feel that they're being supported in the high school journey.

**Mark Sutton, Principal**

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CESE would like to thank the Principal, Mark Sutton; as well as members of the school's welfare team, Jenny Green – Teacher Librarian, Paul Hickey – Year Adviser for Year 12 and PDHPE Teacher, Morgan Howard – Year Adviser for Year 7 and English Teacher, Katherine O'Malley – Year Adviser for Year 10 and Beginning Teacher Mentor, Alison Randall – Head Teacher Welfare, and Antonella Verter – Head Teacher Creative and Performing Arts, for their valuable input into this study.

## Introduction

Cecil Hills High School is a large coeducational school located in south-west Sydney with more than 1,300 students. The school is currently experiencing a period of enrolment growth and plans are underway to provide additional permanent teaching spaces and core facilities. Cecil Hills has a diverse drawing area, which includes established suburbs, a new housing estate, a semi-rural suburb and the area surrounding the site of the new Western Sydney Airport. More than 80% of students are from a language background other than English (LBOTE) and the school has a lower than average Index of Community and Socio-Economic Advantage (ICSEA) with approximately 70% of students in the bottom two ICSEA quartiles. Cecil Hills prides itself on being the school of choice in the local Liverpool area. Students at Cecil Hills perform above average in NAPLAN compared to other 'like' schools.

Wellbeing has been embedded in the philosophy of Cecil Hills since it was founded in 1996. The highly stable school environment contributes to a sense of familiarity, consistency and deep commitment. This has fostered the development of a positive and constantly evolving wellbeing culture. The unofficial motto of Cecil Hills is 'working with your teachers'. It is a phrase used constantly with students to strengthen student-teacher relationships by reinforcing the school's culture

of collaboration. Teachers make a deliberate effort to develop positive relationships with students, and to be flexible and approachable. Importantly, the idea of 'working with your teachers' extends beyond the academic realm. This culture of collaboration has led to the development of an inclusive environment where students feel supported to do their best and meet the school's high expectations.

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The founding principal and deputy had a big role in student welfare. John and Chris very much valued student welfare and put it on a pedestal, and that's a value that has remained within the school.

### Paul Hickey, Year Adviser for Year 12

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At Cecil Hills, standalone programs or initiatives are not the key to improving student wellbeing. Instead, their success is the result of embedding student wellbeing into all aspects of school life. This is made possible by meticulous planning, strong leadership, and the commitment of a dedicated staff and school community.



### What has worked to improve student wellbeing at Cecil Hills High School:

- Reorganising the Year 7 and Year 8 curriculum to build stronger teacher-student relationships and reduce the likelihood of student wellbeing concerns going unnoticed.
- Developing a culture where year adviser roles are highly sought after and valued positions within the school community.
- Strategic use of resources so that: year advisers have a generous period allocation that reflects the complexity of the role; and year advisers and head teachers have additional opportunities to connect with students as the school's relief teachers.
- Appointing two joint year advisers (who apply as a team) 18 months in advance of the Year 7 cohort starting high school, and remain with the same group of students from Year 7 to Year 12.
- Implementing a carefully planned transition program that begins when students are in Year 5.



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So rather than Johnny walking up to his Year 7 English class and thinking. “We’ve got the interesting casual teacher today”... their year adviser pops in. Great – opportunity to connect with the kids, opportunity to settle the class more quickly, an opportunity to reinforce our PBL positive behaviour for learning values.

**Mark Sutton, Principal**

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## Effective leadership and management

Effective leadership and management, particularly at the senior executive level, allows wellbeing to be embedded in the philosophy of Cecil Hills. The examples below highlight how the school has focused on creating positive learning environments to enable student wellbeing for learning.

### Reorganising the junior curriculum

Cecil Hills operates under the premise that some aspects of a traditional high school model do not work well to support student wellbeing. In particular, they believe that being taught by too many different teachers increases the likelihood of wellbeing concerns going unnoticed because there is not enough time to build strong student-teacher relationships. Cecil Hills believes that students in Year 7 and Year 8 are at the greatest risk of wellbeing concerns going unnoticed as they are required to study a greater number of different subjects, and therefore spend less time with each of their teachers, than students in Years 9 to 12. To increase the time that students spend with each of their teachers, Cecil Hills has reorganised their Year 7 and Year 8 curriculum in recent years so each student now has a maximum of seven different teachers. Students had up to 12 different teachers prior to this change. This change has been made possible by both adjusting the way subjects are arranged within the timetable, and allocating teachers to the same class for more than one subject where possible. For example, history and geography are taught in Year 7 or Year 8 rather than in both years; one mathematics/science teacher may teach both subjects; one history/English teacher may teach both subjects; and students do not study music and visual arts in the same semester, which reduces the number of different teachers students have at any point in time.

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In high school we give students 15 teachers. Of course your head would spin. In terms of welfare, cracks would start to emerge, they [students] become a number in the system, and the poor art teacher has eight or nine classes. Are they really focused on welfare? Probably not.

**Mark Sutton, Principal**

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Reorganising the junior curriculum has been highly successful at Cecil Hills and plans are underway to reduce the number of teachers for Year 7 and Year 8 students even further. This reorganisation has helped to create a more effective environment for learning because it provides teachers with more frequent opportunities to get to know their students. The school has also reported that students are more 'settled'.

### Reducing the use of casual relief teachers

Cecil Hills has a focus on reducing the number of casual relief teachers. The school has introduced a system where year advisers and head teachers are deliberately 'underloaded' by up to two periods each week. This provides these teachers with release time that is additional to their respective year adviser and head teacher allocations. This allows the year advisers and head teachers, who all have a strong knowledge of the school culture, context, students, systems and content, to act as the school's relief teachers. The relief teacher arrangement at Cecil Hills is also highly effective because it provides increased opportunities for year advisers to interact with their student cohort. It also leads to calmer classrooms that are more conducive to learning.

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It [the generous time allocations for year advisers] allows us to reflect on what worked well and what didn't ... we look at all of our programs and we evaluate them. This not only helps our grade, but also the next grade coming through. We're able to assist them as well.

**Morgan Howard,  
Year Adviser for Year 7**

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## Strategic use of resources

The Cecil Hills executive team has strategically used resources to embed wellbeing across the school. The welfare team commented that they were given many opportunities to participate in the types of targeted professional learning required to be successful in their roles. What the staff find most valuable, however, is the way the school executive maximises the resources that are available to give them a generous period allocation within the existing timetable. Staff take full advantage of this time to plan, implement programs, evaluate their practice and get to know their students better. This model has been so successful that the executive team has decided to increase the period allocation in 2019. This means that staff who are crucial to the whole-school wellbeing approach, such as year advisers, will receive a 150 minute period allowance every week.

The principal explained how this generous allowance can be implemented in a large public high school with limited resources. Due to increasing enrolments, Cecil Hills was entitled to an additional head teacher. The school considered their staffing arrangements, but decided that rather than employing an additional head teacher, they would use the flexibility available in the allocation of staffing resources to request that the head teacher allowance be assigned as a classroom teacher vacancy. This is now used to provide year advisers and head teachers with additional release from face-to-face teaching.

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Wellbeing is not just about working with those individual high risk students, it's about every student's wellbeing.

**Paul Hickey, Year Adviser for Year 12**

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The generous time allocations have contributed to a positive staff culture where teachers are committed to continuous improvement, collaborating and helping one another regularly. This is evident by the way staff at Cecil Hills use evaluation not only as a way to improve their own practice, but also to assist other teachers. For example, one of the current Year 7 advisers explained how his evaluation of the 2018 Year 7 program is designed to inform his own future practice, and also that of the 2019 Year 7 advisers. Overall, this positive staff culture contributes immensely to the school continually evolving and refining its practice so that it can meet the changing needs of students.

## Strong systems and structures support a whole-school approach

The staff at Cecil Hills highlight the importance of adopting and embracing a whole-school approach to ensure optimal learning conditions for all students. In practice, this means that wellbeing is embedded in everything they do and it is not considered to be an additional component of a student's education.



## Using the year adviser role and an effective transition program to ensure students are known, valued and cared for

Effective use of the 'year adviser' role has contributed significantly to the success of a whole-school approach to wellbeing for learning. Cecil Hills has worked hard to develop a culture where year advisers are highly sought after and valued positions. These teachers play a leading role in building and sustaining the school's continually evolving culture of wellbeing, so that every child is known, valued and cared for in this large school setting.

Seeing the students walk in on the first day and knowing that they have been to the school before, it's not their first time here, they've experienced multiple times coming here knowing the teachers, and knowing me as a year adviser and somebody who they can come to with any issue. It's just really rewarding.

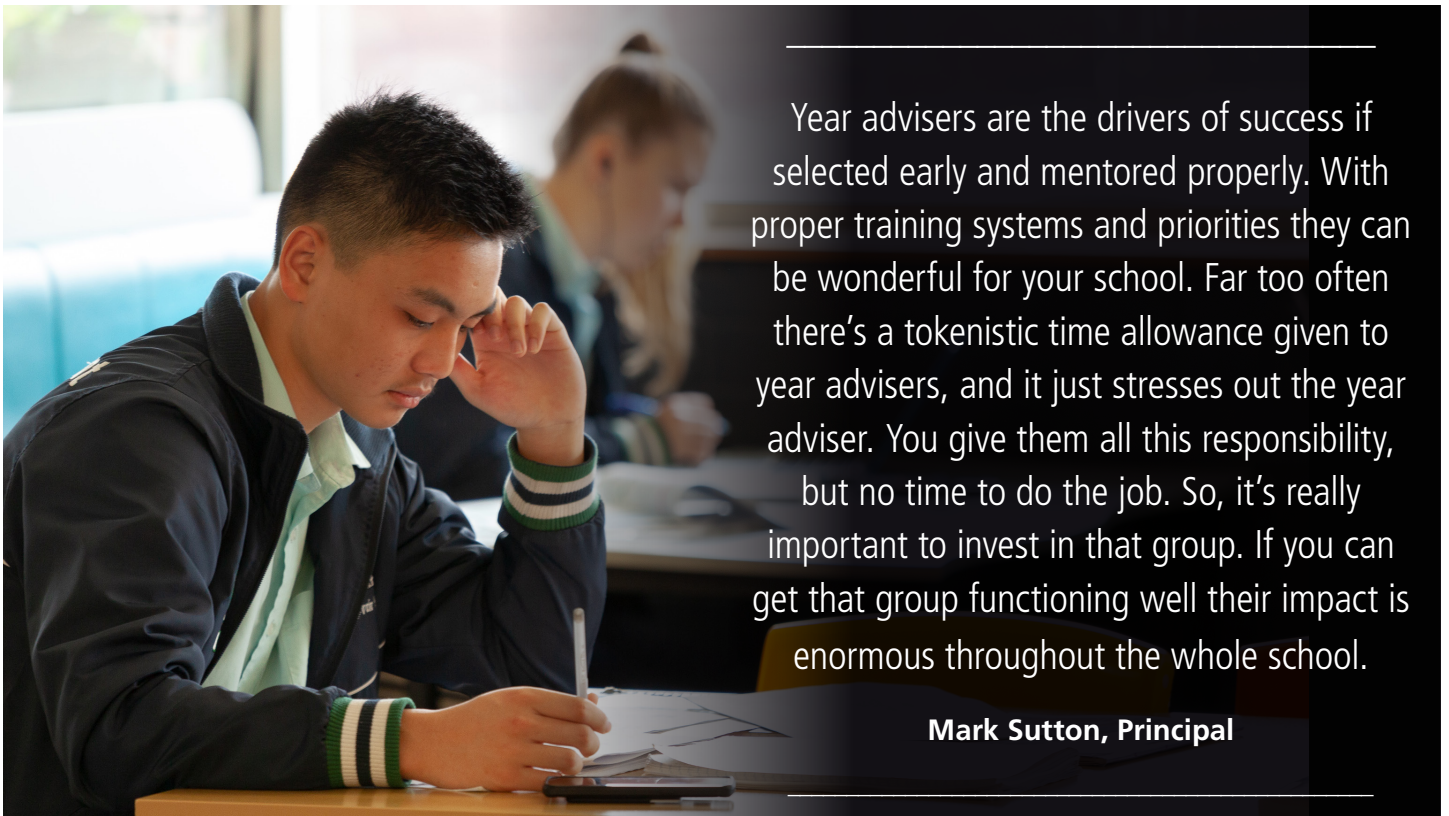
### Morgan Howard, Year Adviser for Year 7

Rather than use the traditional model of having a year adviser and an assistant year adviser, Cecil Hills appoints two teachers as joint year advisers for each grade. These teachers, who apply for the year adviser roles together as a team of two, remain with the same group of students from Year 7 to Year 12. An expression of interest process is completed if a year adviser cannot continue in their role. Significantly, the role of year adviser commences long before students begin their first day of Year 7. Year advisers are selected 18 months in advance. For

example, the year advisers for the cohort that will commence Year 7 in 2020 were selected in August 2018. The deliberate early selection of year advisers allows these teachers ample time to complete targeted professional learning, and provides opportunities for year advisers to get to know students before they begin Year 7.


Year 7 year advisers in particular play a leading role in laying the foundations for a positive wellbeing culture at the school through a carefully planned and implemented transition program. This program, which begins when students are in Year 5, increases the likelihood of a smooth transition from primary to high school. This is a time when student engagement levels often dip. Transition activities include year advisers visiting the school's three feeder primary schools, future students participating in 'sample high school' lessons at Cecil Hills, question and answer sessions with staff, and buddy mentoring. Year advisers also work directly with staff at each feeder primary school so they can plan appropriately for the needs of all students before they commence Year 7. This plays a key role in creating optimum conditions for learning in the school.

A generous period allowance ensures that year advisers are given time to continue developing strong connections with students as they move through high school. This period allowance reflects both the complexity and time-consuming nature of the role, in addition to the school's commitment to embed a proactive and whole-school wellbeing for learning approach. The strong connection that students develop with their year advisers is highlighted by the large number of former students who return to the school to say hello and touch base with their year advisers.



Year advisers are the drivers of success if selected early and mentored properly. With proper training systems and priorities they can be wonderful for your school. Far too often there's a tokenistic time allowance given to year advisers, and it just stresses out the year adviser. You give them all this responsibility, but no time to do the job. So, it's really important to invest in that group. If you can get that group functioning well their impact is enormous throughout the whole school.

**Mark Sutton, Principal**

A network diagram with various sized nodes and connecting lines, set against a teal background.

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