



Students Flourishing Part 2: Wellbeing From Years 4 – 12 & Preventing The Downhill Slide

Sparked by the global pandemic, the year 2020 presented Australian schools with a raft of student wellbeing challenges, the likes of which have never been seen before. In this environment we set our sights on creating a system to help schools answer a most important question: *“How can we know that students are really flourishing in our school?”*

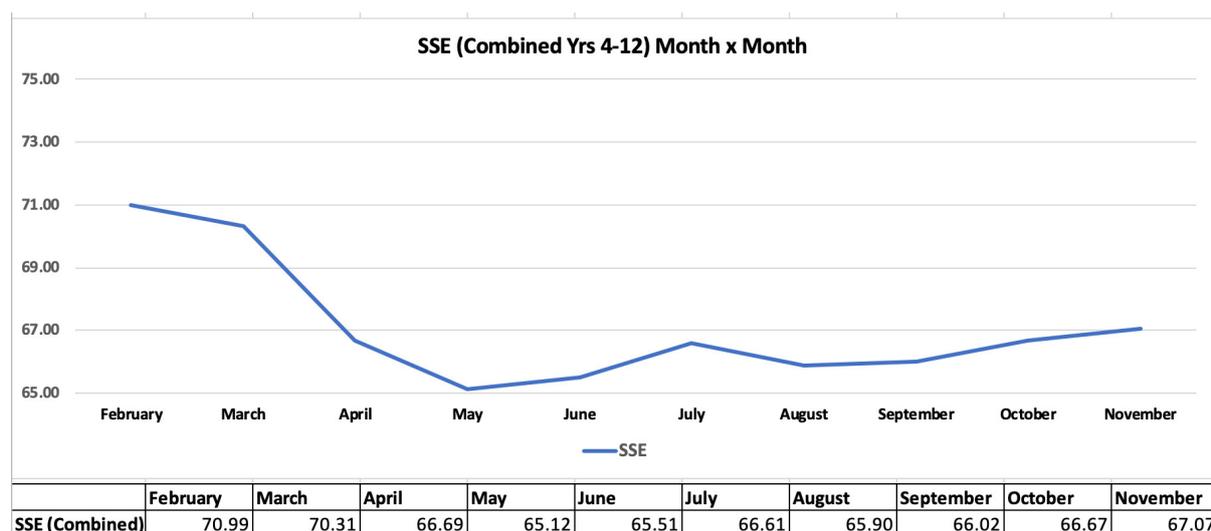
In this second article of our series on Student Wellbeing ([click here for the first article](#)) we will press the 'fast forward button' on our research into student wellbeing by analysing over 12 months of student pulse data and share three important trends we have observed across Australian schools:

1. Student Self-Efficacy fluctuates across the year and is somewhat in sync with Collective Teacher Efficacy;
2. Student self-efficacy averages vary significantly between year level cohorts, with High School Students (Years 7 to 12) having much lower levels of overall self-efficacy (across all SSE subscales) compared to students in Primary School (Years 4-6); and
3. High School Students' Help Seeking (Teacher/Student Relationships) and Self-Motivation (Resilience and Coping Skills) could be improved by (a) strengthening relationships between students and their key teacher (ie., home group teacher); and (b) increasing the focus on the regular practice of, as opposed to the teaching of, resiliency orientated coping skills.

In this article we will unpack these three findings in detail and discuss the implications for both teaching and learning practices and targeted student wellbeing programs. We'll also explore how using student wellbeing profiles x cohort may provide baseline data for schools to more effectively measure and manage their efforts to maximise student wellbeing. This in turn advances whole of school performance frameworks to catch up to the post-industrial models of teaching and learning now widely accepted across the world.

(1) Student Self-Efficacy fluctuates across the year and is somewhat in sync with Collective Teacher Efficacy

Our previous research on Collective Teacher Efficacy has shown that CTE levels fluctuate in lockstep with the variable workload demands across the school year. Given this, we anticipated that Student Self-Efficacy (*a student's self-belief about their ability to learn new information and complete their schoolwork*) would similarly fluctuate according to demands of a student's schoolwork. As you can see in the Table below there is definitely some variability in overall SSE across the school year with a notable trend downward as workload and assessment demands increase.

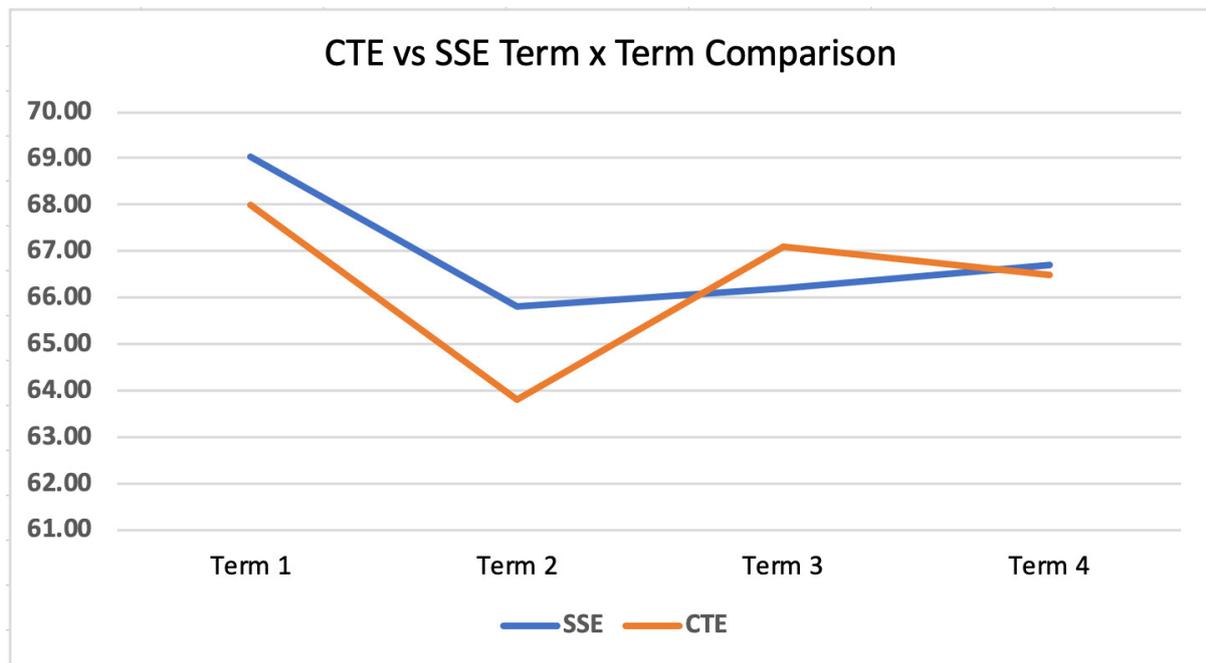


This decline in SSE is as expected, due to the widely accepted notion that learning in and of itself is a stressful and challenging process that places inevitable strain on SSE, especially as workloads and assessment demands increase. However, until now, researchers have focused on measuring SSE as a one off rather than tracking the normative variance in SSE levels across a whole school year, limiting our ability to determine 'normal' vs 'abnormal' or 'typical' vs 'atypical' levels of stress and strain over time on school students as a general population.

Variance In SSE: Looking Beyond Workload

Beyond student workloads, the impact of Collective Teacher Efficacy also appears to be an important contributor to variability in SSE. As you can see in the graph below, overall levels of SSE and CTE trend similarly from term to term. This suggests a strong relationship between teacher capacity (CTE) and SSE – when teachers are under pressure themselves (as evidenced

by lower CTE) there is a negative impact on the self-efficacy of their students. Significantly, while this finding may make intuitive sense, until now research has been unable to highlight this link so clearly.



	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4
SSE	69.03	65.80	66.20	66.70
CTE	68.01	63.80	67.10	66.50

The implications of (1) the strong relationship between CTE and SSE on teaching and learning, as well as (2) how to incorporate CTE and SSE measures into wider performance frameworks that assess school performance is a critical school improvement initiative (which will be discussed later in this article).

(2) Student Self-Efficacy varies significantly across cohorts with all cohorts from High School (Years 7 to 12) having much lower levels of self-efficacy across all subscales compared to Primary School Students (Years 4-6)

Although it is important to recognise that SSE fluctuates across the school year, it is perhaps even more important to understand how SSE differs between different year level cohorts. After all, age related developmental demands differ greatly as children grow through childhood, into adolescence, and early adulthood. Epidemiological evidence suggests that mental health conditions in children and adolescents vary by age group, therefore it is reasonable to assume that SSE levels also vary accordingly. Given this assumption, in order to optimise teaching and learning, we must answer the question:

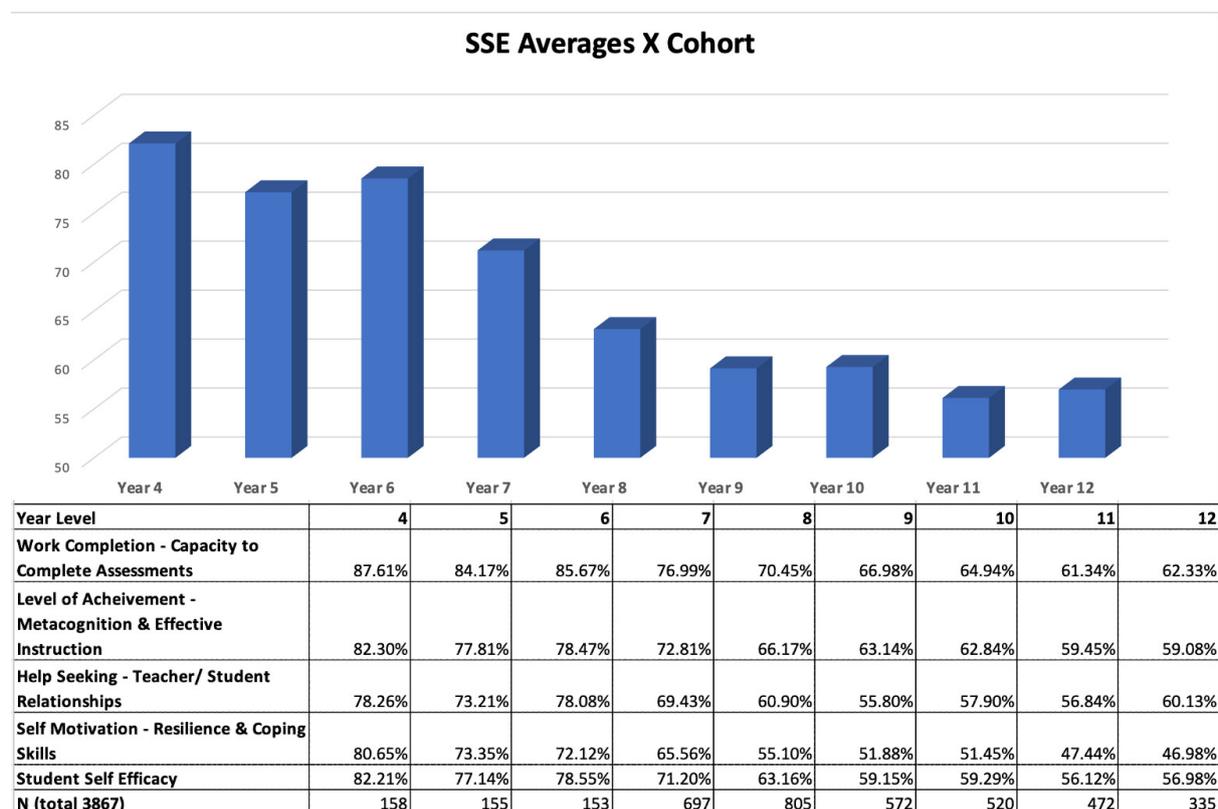
“What is the normal level of SSE to be expected for students in each grade of their school lives?”

Answering this important question would enable teachers to directly compare their own classes' SSE results against peer averages and determine whether fluctuations in class SSE during the school year were typical vs. atypical when compared to similar age / cohort norms. The result of such an understanding would allow teachers to plan for and provide the correct level of support for student's needs throughout the year, as well as moderating their own expectations regarding student coping (i.e., not becoming overly distressed if patterns of lower SSE are present yet fall within normal bounds).

Fluctuations in SSE: From Theory to Practice

Turning to our case data, as you can see in the Table below, SSE levels in high school students (years 7-12) are much lower when compared to primary school students (grades 4-6) with a pronounced downward trend between years 9-12. Anecdotally this decline in SSE makes sense as it seems to correlate with an increase in the prevalence of diagnosed mental health conditions as children progress from primary to high school. This finding should give educators and school leaders pause for thought when evaluating the effects of student wellbeing initiatives in schools, as it should be expected that improvements in SSE would be quantitatively differentiated by year level.

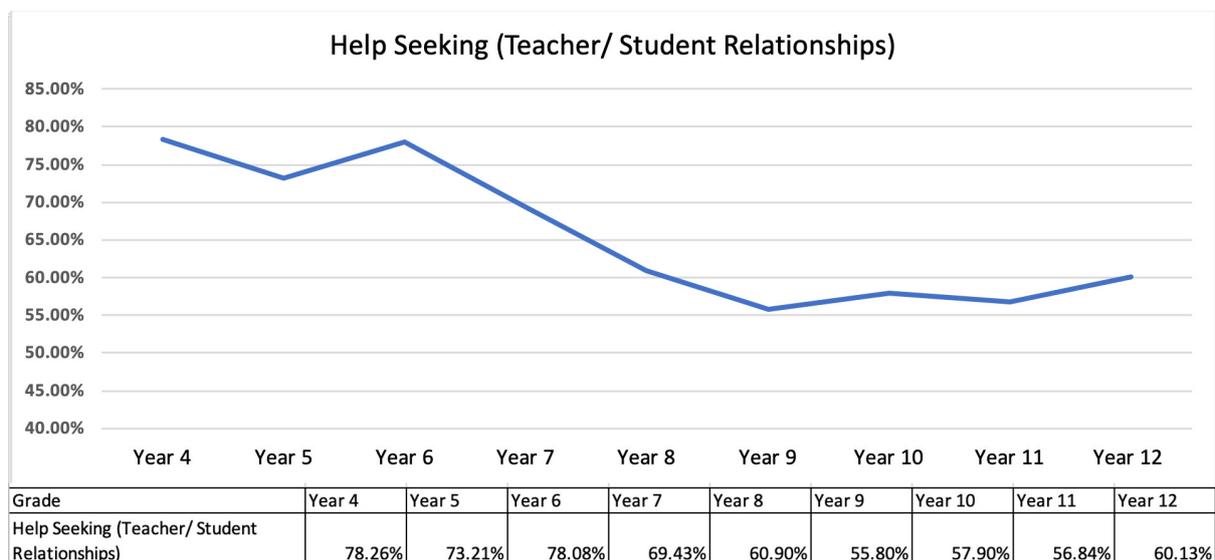
When examining the SSE subscales, there is a clear step down between primary school and high school across all domains – with the notable declines in Motivation and Help Seeking a likely opportunity for high schools to make some significant improvements in how they operate both in terms of class specific teachers and allocated class lessons (home group teachers and home group lessons) and a more rigorous approach to developing resilience orientated coping skills within students – which we'll discuss in the next section.



3. High School Students’ Help Seeking (Teacher/Student Relationships) and Self-Motivation (Resilience and Coping Skills) could be improved by (a) strengthening relationships between students and their key teacher (ie., home group teacher); and (b) increasing the focus on the regular practice of, as opposed to the teaching of, resiliency orientated coping skills.

Help Seeking: The Unicorn Effect

As you can see in the Table below, on average, Help Seeking (teacher/student relationships) declines dramatically when students transition from primary school to high school.



This finding is particularly worrying given that it is widely recognised that effective student-teacher relationships are one of the most important precursors for both academic achievement and student wellbeing.

This notable drop can be easily explained by one of the biggest structural differences between primary and high school – the increasing number and complexity of teacher relationships that students must manage and adapt to in high school (where it is common for students to have a different teacher for each subject) versus primary school (where it is more common for students to have a singular teacher for the majority of subjects).

We have previously discussed how high levels of capacity to communicate and connect form the foundations of the strongest student-teacher relationships, as well as the resulting ‘magic moments’ that this creates in the classroom – we have coined this the ‘unicorn effect’ ([read more here](#)). Accordingly, it is far more likely that ‘magic’ will occur in the classroom when students report high levels of SSE AND school staff report high levels of CTE. Correspondingly,

lower levels of SSE or CTE (or both) diminishes the likelihood of the strong relationships (and by extension the 'unicorn' effect). We have previously devoted extensive discussion around how to improve CTE levels within teaching staff ([read more here](#)). We will now focus on addressing the student side of the equation – the decline in SSE that occurs during the high school years related to help seeking.

So how do we bolster the help seeking of students in years 7-12 while operating within the constraints of our current secondary education system?

If the core difference in the decline in high school students' Help Seeking is truly related to the increasing number and complexity of teacher relationships that students must manage AND we cannot change the structure of how high school is taught to mimic primary school (i.e., assigning a singular teacher for all of a students' subjects) then the answer may lie in more prominently promoting one key and consistent student-teacher relationship, that of the student and their home group teacher.

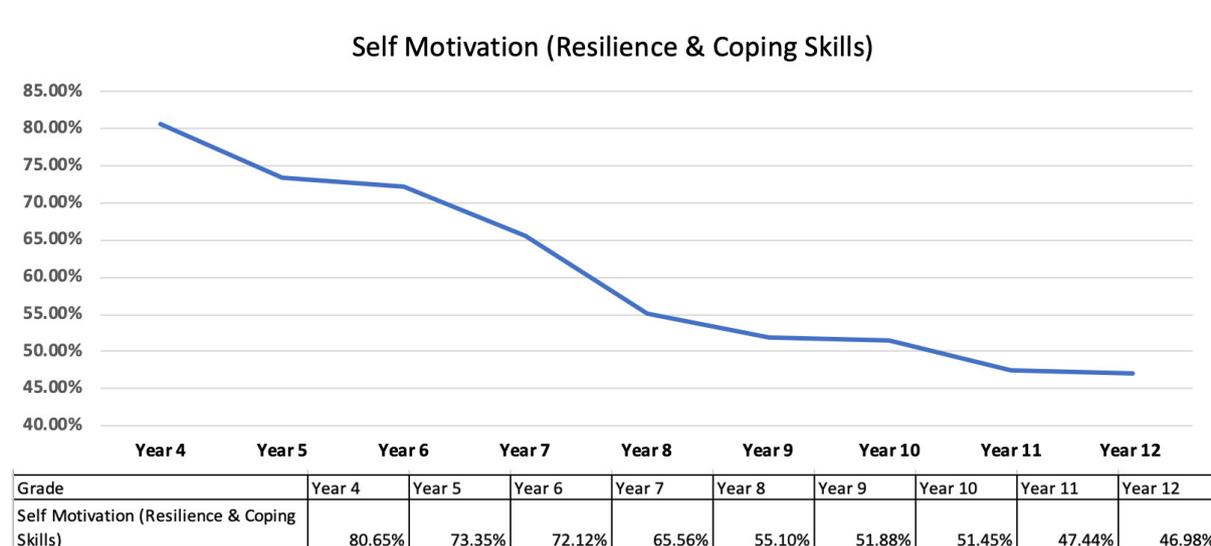
As a result, school leaders should examine (a) how we support home group teachers and (b) how we provision time and structure for home group lessons.

(a) **How we support home group teachers** – Anecdotally in many schools, the role of the home group teacher is seen as merely an 'add on' work task rather than an important role in its own right. To shift this perception it would be important for schools to provision targeted training and supervision time so that teaching staff could develop the specialist skills needed for rapport building. Such training should focus on understanding personality and effective teacher-student working relationships as well as the use of student pulse data and tools to engage students in meaningful data driven wellbeing discussions. Beyond upskilling teachers, facilitator training to engage students in classroom personality profiling, developing classroom engagement tools, and leading the practice of wellbeing activities such as mindfulness meditation, use of reflection and goal setting tools and skills drills for communicating with different personality types (of peer students and teachers) should be provided.

(b) **How we provision time and structure for home group lessons** – In many schools home group is seen by both staff and students as 'administrative time' where activity is largely variable and unstructured beyond the marking of the daily class roll. If schools were to truly value the student-home group teacher relationship [they could both enhance and upgrade home group time provided at the start of each day to be more focused on working relationships, as well as provide an additional lesson or double lesson time of 35-70min once or twice per week](#) facilitated by the same home group teacher to engage in the PRACTICE of resilience focused coping skills such as mindfulness, mediation, reflection and goal setting, and communication with different personality types. The success criteria for such a time would not be about skills mastery per se but rather purely focused on satisfactory attendance and participation in both engaging in and leading these activities on a rotational basis between attending students.

Self Motivation: Practice Makes Progress

Turning now to our second area of focus, Self-Motivation (resilience and coping skills), we found that like help seeking, a similar downward trend occurred over time as students transitioned from primary school to high school (see below).



Prior to the current study, during our pilot research we could see that consistent goal setting and classroom reflection activities led to improvements in SSE (as reported in the previous article) however follow up with schools over the next 12 months (current study) showed a limited use of these tools in many schools post pilot. There was also wide variation in the extent to which designated wellbeing lessons and home group lessons followed prescribed content. Middle and Senior School Leaders reported difficulty getting consistency across teachers using these tools for a variety of reasons related to workload pressures, industrial tensions, staff shortages and a lack of recognition of the importance of this work when juggling competing priorities. Where a consistent wellbeing orientated program was able to be implemented there was a tendency to focus on teaching of theories and skills akin to HPE style curriculum as opposed to a rigorous and disciplined approach to the consistent practice of resiliency orientated skills such as goal setting, reflection and mindfulness.

Clearly a more systemic solution to this problem is urgently needed and it is anticipated that increasing the recognition of SSE data and the provision of practical resiliency orientated wellbeing lessons as part of the wider upgrade of school performance frameworks will set the foundations for more sustained improvement in this area.

Bringing It All Together...

‘Every student flourishing’ is the mantra that guides all high performance schools – but what does this actually mean? ‘Flourishing’ in the post-industrial model of schools is not just about teaching and learning for high academic achievement but also to increase wellbeing and related social / emotional capabilities.

Many schools implement structured wellbeing and positive education programs but the extent to which these programs actually lift student wellbeing above the baseline remains unclear. Many schools don't actually have a student wellbeing baseline to begin with and without this evidence assessing the impact of their wellbeing programs is problematic.

Moreover, this lack of more rigorous standardised measurement of student wellbeing and related outcome data may be another reason why many education systems around the world remain tied to the older industrial model of evaluating school performance relying more on traditional measures of academic achievement, attendance, and satisfaction. If we are to ensure that 'every student can succeed' in this post-industrial definition of success, inclusive of both achievement and wellbeing, then we urgently need school performance frameworks to embrace a more rigorous approach to student wellbeing.

In this two part article we have put forward a new way to measure, manage and maximise student wellbeing, and in doing so have provided the missing link to an authentic and comprehensive way to ensure student wellbeing is not simply an 'add on' to school agendas but can become deeply embedded in the frameworks for teaching and learning and measuring school performance.

If our students are to truly succeed in a future world requiring both academic and social emotional skills, it is our obligation to apply the lessons learned. We must redefine the notion of a great school as one that not only allows students to achieve their full academic potential, but also maximises their wellbeing throughout the journey.

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