



Newtown Neighbourhood Centre's Peer Bridge Program Program Evaluation August 2025

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Acknowledgments.

On behalf of the Co-design Health Research Team (CHRI) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), I would like to thank the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre for inviting us to evaluate this innovative program. Our research focuses on understanding and fostering positive change and growth for individuals, as well as promoting positive change within organisations and systems.

I want to acknowledge and thank the CHRI team for their governance support in this project. I am also grateful to UNSW for supporting the continuation of this work, including providing ethics oversight for the next phase of the program.

I want to thank the NNC staff and volunteers who consulted on the design of the evaluation protocol and assisted with data collection for this program. I would also like to thank Dr. Susan Green for her expertise in contributing to the evaluation and consultation regarding the next phase of the research.

I want to acknowledge and thank the Jermyn Family Foundation, the Rebecca Perry Collective, and Di Jones Consulting for their generous contribution to the NNC, which supports this program. Innovation is only possible when funders are willing to support bold new initiatives.

This program provided a unique opportunity to support positive transitions for young people moving into high school and also emphasised the benefits for caregivers and older peer mentors involved in this type of program. Led by Elaine Macnish, the NNC continues to find innovative ways to support all community members. The NNC's strengths-based approach, which underpins the Peer Bridge Program, emphasises the importance of community-led initiatives in addressing challenges and creating opportunities for people living, working, and learning in this community.

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Purpose of this Report.

The purpose of this report is to assess the acceptability and impact of the Peer Bridge pilot program at Newtown Neighbourhood Centre.

This report forms part of the overall program evaluation and does not include the impact on the staff of NNC or the schools involved in this study. A more extensive evaluation has been planned for the next phase of the program, which will provide insights on feasibility and requirements for scale-up.

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Executive Summary

The Peer Bridge Program was developed and pilot tested to evaluate the acceptability and practicality of a community-based mentoring initiative where older peers support students transitioning from Year 6 to high school. While the peer-mentoring component is a central feature, feedback from participants and program staff highlights that a key mechanism of change was the active involvement of a youth worker who supported both students and their parents/carers. This support helped fill the gap often experienced by families when transitioning from the more personalised environment of primary school to the larger, more independent high school setting.

The program received positive feedback from students, their caregivers, and the Year 9 mentors. Although it is not possible to attribute all improvements directly to the program, students and caregivers report high levels of satisfaction, a stronger sense of connection, and increased school engagement after participating. These outcomes support ongoing implementation and further evaluation.

Students described increased confidence, independence, and engagement. They credited the Bridge program and friends with helping them successfully transition to high school. Their main concern remaining after the program was managing homework.

“I feel like I belong here because I have been able to make friends, have good teachers, and get good grades.”

“I thought it [Bridge Program] was really great. Helped me understand what I needed to prepare.”

Students Perspectives	Before the Program	After the Program
Liked school either “a lot” or “a little bit”	48%	80%
Felt a sense of belonging “a lot” or “a little bit”	75%	94%
Credited the Bridge Program with helping them to adjust		60%

In addition to supporting their children, carers also mentioned that the program helped ease their anxiety about their child’s transition to high school. Carers valued the direct communication and proactive outreach from the youth worker, including regular updates and emotional support. The youth worker also served as a critical liaison between carers and high school welfare staff, ensuring students’ individual needs were better understood and supported.

“Knowing that there was the extra layer of support there, that we could ask for help in the future, as well as the resource pack”

“Helped my anxiety. It took a lot of that away”

Carers believe their child:	Before the Program	After the Program
Liked school either “a lot” or “a little bit”	58%	88%
Felt a sense of belonging “a lot” or “a little bit”	73%	88%
Credited the Bridge Program with helping them to adjust		100%

Year nine mentors also benefited from participating in the program.

Mentors perceived themselves as having:	After the Program
Helped their mentee	90%
Increased leadership skills	100%
Benefited from the mentor training	100%

Background

Transitioning from primary to secondary school is a significant milestone, and while most students adjust relatively smoothly,^[1] up to 31% experience serious challenges.^[2] These difficulties can have lasting impacts on emotional well-being, academic success, and school retention.^[3] Risk factors include behavioural or emotional difficulties in primary school, disengagement with schoolwork, poor peer relationships, and limited participation in extracurricular activities.^[4] Alongside environmental and relational challenges, it is vital to recognise that the timing of the primary-to-secondary transition often coincides with key developmental shifts. Many students are entering adolescence, a period marked by rapid emotional, cognitive, and social development. These “coming of age” changes can heighten the emotional stress during this transition and may impact students’ ability to regulate and adapt effectively. Programs that recognise and respond to this layered developmental complexity are more likely to provide meaningful, lasting support.

To strengthen smoother transitions to high school, the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre (NNC) developed and pilot-tested the Peer Bridge Program. This community-based initiative combines peer mentoring and group-based activities with dedicated youth worker support. While peer mentoring is central, **program designers and staff emphasised that a critical driver of change was the active, ongoing involvement of a skilled youth worker.** This role helped bridge a widely acknowledged gap between the strong relational support often found in primary schools and the more resource-constrained, independent environment of high school.

Peer mentoring and group-based programs are commonly used to support students during this period; however, most of these initiatives are not formally evaluated. Although evidence is limited, with only six studies examining cross-age peer mentoring in this context, research indicates moderate positive effects. Programs with strong adult oversight and those delivered outside of school hours tend to be more effective.^[5] However, there is currently no single model recognised as best practice for school transition support.

A key feature of the Peer Bridge Program was the inclusion of a dedicated youth worker, who acted as a consistent and trusted adult presence throughout the transition. The approach emphasised relationships, readiness, and recognising each child’s unique strengths and needs. Through respectful collaboration with school staff, the youth worker supported the identification of students who might benefit from additional connection or encouragement, always framed as an opportunity to support potential.

Interviews with staff and carers revealed the importance of this relational work, particularly the early outreach to carers, the creative methods used to build trust (such as sharing positive anecdotes and photos), and the practical supports offered during a time when many carers feel less connected to their child’s new school environment. As the youth worker explained,

“The school had known the students for six years. They had a very good relationship with the parents. So it was about holding all that information safe—but then meeting the child and parent with a clean slate.”

This relational bridge-building between students, carers, schools, and the program was instrumental in helping young people feel seen, supported, and confident about their new school. It also helped maintain continuity of care and ensured that carers didn’t feel “cut off” during the transition.

With the support of the Jermyn Family Foundation, the Rebecca Perry Collective, and Di Jones Consulting, Newtown Neighbourhood Centre (NNC) developed and pilot-tested the **Peer Bridge Program** to assess its **acceptability, feasibility, and impact** in assisting young people during their transition to high school.

The program was developed by Tom McDonald, Elaine Macnish, and Alice Fennell, with contributions from Dr Susan Green (Principal, Newtown High School of the Performing Arts). It was carried out from September 2024 to May 2025. Forty-eight youth commenced the program, and forty-one completed it. The reasons for non-completion are:

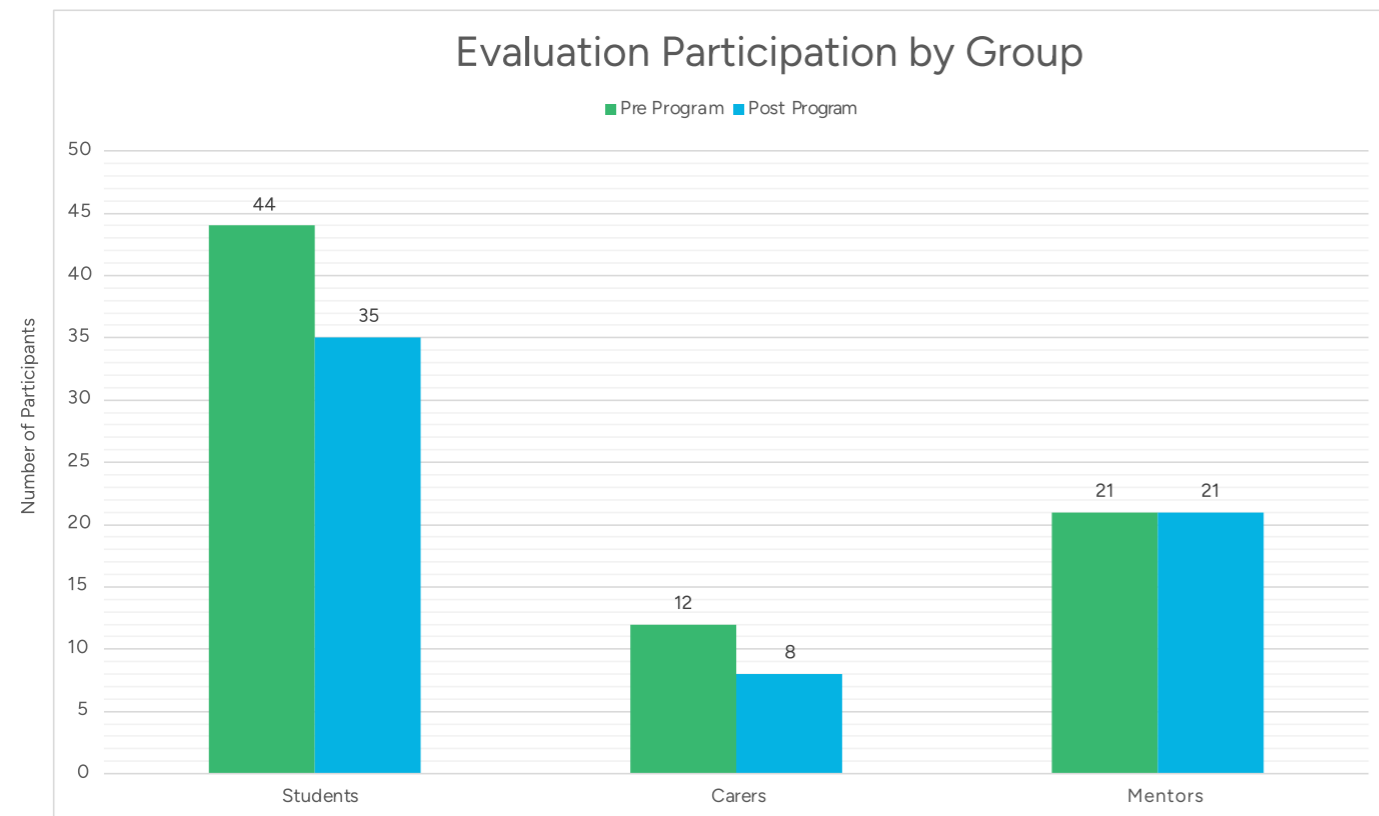
- One student did not commence high school (complete school refusal).
- Two students initially attended some events in term 1, but their attendance declined over time.
- Four students’ attendance was acceptable, but they did not want to continue the program.

Methods and Key Findings.

Methods

Evaluation involved pre- and post-program surveys carried out by the youth worker in a relaxed, conversational manner. This approach not only supported ethical, low-pressure participation but also allowed the youth worker to begin building relationships with students and carers before the program formally began. Forty-four students completed surveys before starting the program, while 35 did so after finishing. Twelve parents/carers took part in pre-interviews and eight in post-interviews. Additionally, twenty-one mentors (Year 8/9 students) participated in both pre- and post-interviews (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of participants involved in pre- and post-program evaluation activities, by group.



Importantly, the youth worker worked closely with primary school staff to review the full cohort of transitioning students and collaboratively identified those who might benefit from additional support. This relationship-based screening process ensured that selection was nuanced, equitable, and non-stigmatising. The youth worker also initiated individual contact with carers early in the process—using emails, texts, and phone calls—to invite engagement and offer tailored updates and support. Notes from interviews and observational insights were compiled throughout group and individual activities, providing a layered understanding of each student’s transition experience from multiple viewpoints (youth, carer, school staff, and mentor).

Program staff were interviewed, providing information about the program design and delivery as well as providing insights about the factors that contributed to successful outcomes for the students, their carers, the mentors and the school staff.

Findings - Pre Program

Before participating in the Peer Bridge Program, students and carers shared their hopes and concerns through surveys and informal interviews. These initial engagements were conducted by the youth worker, who deliberately used this period not only to collect data but also to begin building rapport with both students and carers. As the youth worker described,

“Before I even met any of the kids, I was already trying to understand their history with the school... but also wanted to know them exactly as they met me, as a stranger would.”

Importantly, the youth worker met with primary school staff—including principals and deputies—to discuss the entire cohort of Year 6 students. Together, they identified students who might benefit from the program. This collaborative and non-stigmatising approach enabled a strengths-based entry into the program, ensuring no student or family felt targeted.

In tandem, the youth worker reached out to carers individually, offering support and updates. Some carers were immediately engaged; others were more reserved. Through emails, texts, calls, and creative outreach (such as sending photos of children succeeding in activities), trust was slowly built. One carer, initially uncertain about the program’s relevance, later said:

“Even coming from a strong situation, I think they benefited.”

The youth worker used early conversations with carers and school staff not only to confirm these perspectives but also to better understand which students might benefit from additional encouragement a connection-building as they transitioned. By drawing on a wide range of insights—school context, carer input, and her own one-on-one meetings—she was able to offer tailored support that recognised each young person’s unique strengths and needs.

Before participating in the Newtown Peer Bridge Program, 48% of students reported that they liked school either “a lot” or “a little bit.” Notably, a much larger proportion — 75% — felt a sense of belonging at school. Qualitative feedback supports this strong sense of belonging, with friendships playing a key role in their positive feelings.

“There are cool people that are my friends”

“Without it, you’re not very social”

“I’ve been here for ages and I know everyone”

Carers, similarly, believed their child enjoyed school (58%) and felt they belonged there (73%).

During the early stages of the program, the youth worker collaborated closely with school staff and carers to build a fuller picture of each student’s strengths, interests, and potential areas where a bit of extra support might be helpful. These early conversations helped ensure that participation felt positive and purposeful, not a response to a problem, but a way to help students thrive in a new setting. This strengths-focused, whole-child approach helped avoid assumptions and ensured each young person was seen in the context of their relationships, abilities, and aspirations.

Most students (73%) said they got on well with their teachers, and 70% said it was important to them to get good marks at school. While getting good marks was important, the qualitative data show a more complex view of students and learning, with some students showing a strong interest in specific subjects. In contrast, other comments suggest that some students find their schoolwork less engaging.

“I don’t pay attention because it’s too easy”

“Repetitive. Been doing same thing for years”

Methods and Key Findings.

Carers held a more positive view of student-teacher relationships, with 91% indicating their child got along well with teachers. Most carers (64%) said it was important for their child to achieve good marks at school, while only 55% believed that their child's good marks were important to the child.

The most common emotions students described when thinking about their current school were happiness (48%), excitement (23%), and curiosity (14%). Most (61%) believed they would miss their old school once they made the transition. While the majority of students reported positive or neutral emotions when reflecting on their primary school, a small group expressed **multiple negative feelings**, such as feeling sad (5%), worried (7%), lonely (2%) or afraid (2%). A few students elaborated on their feelings, and their comments revolved around losing/missing friends and leaving behind their current school.

“I think next year is going to be scary honestly.”

These reflections were also supported by the youth worker's one-on-one interviews, which provided a valuable opportunity to see students in contrast to how they behaved in groups. The youth worker noted that students who appeared confident among friends were sometimes much more introspective when interviewed alone—insights that allowed for more nuanced support planning.

Students experiencing negative emotions did not necessarily report feeling a low sense of belonging or poor relationships with teachers, in fact, some expressed strong connections with staff and a general fondness for the school. The qualitative data highlighted the role primary school teachers play by providing flexibility for students who might be struggling. It also underscores the importance of ensuring similar supports are available for students who could benefit from such relationships and flexibility as they transition to high school. These findings underline the importance of continuity in relational support during the transition. The youth worker noted that primary schools often had “very good relationships with the parents” and “could offer flexible, individualised care”. High schools, in contrast, may not have the capacity to replicate this level of responsiveness, making the youth worker's role a vital relational bridge. One student's reflection captured this contrast:

“I tell them stuff when I'm sad, and they [teachers] let me sit in the playground when I need space.”

When explicitly asked about concerns they had about going to high school before the transition, the most common concerns were **homework (64%)**, difficult classes (52%), and **missing old friends (48%)**. Students also shared worries about navigating their new school, such as **getting lost** and **arriving on time for class (36%)**. A smaller group mentioned social or academic challenges, like **getting along with teachers (25%)** and **fitting in or making friends (22%)**. A smaller, yet still notable, number of students raised concerns about **bullying (11%)** or **peer pressure (14%)**.

These concerns were echoed in the qualitative data when asked about what they heard about the new school. The youth worker found that when schools and carers openly shared these contextual concerns early—especially fears about bullying or peer pressure—she could begin responding with practical reassurances and planning before the students even started high school.

“Some people vape in class and there was a weapon someone brought to class”

“Too much bullying”.

“That it's a lot different to public school. It's a lot bigger. There's way more homework.”

These findings highlight the importance of **looking beyond surface indicators** of engagement. Even students who seem well-connected might be facing **emotional challenges** as they approach the move to high school. Spotting and supporting these students early could be crucial for ensuring a smoother and more confident transition.

Most (82%) of the students indicated that they were looking forward to attending their new school. When asked what they were most looking forward to about starting high school, students' responses clustered around two key themes: social connection and new opportunities for choice and variety.

The most common response was “Making new friends (64%),” highlighting a strong focus on social opportunities and new relationships. Just over half of the students (55%) expressed excitement about “Choosing classes” and “Having more freedom,” pointing to a growing interest in independence and access to broader activities.

Likewise, many students positively anticipated “Having different teachers” (43%) and “Sports” (45%), suggesting they are looking forward to novelty and more varied school experiences. Together, these results suggest that students approached this transition phase with **optimism about change, gaining more autonomy and chances for new social engagement**.

“It's got lots of creative options. And it's got lots of opportunities and lots of different options for things you might like.”

Many students saw the program as an extension of their optimism for the future—a place to generate excitement and confidence about high school. The program included playful, low-pressure activities (like using the high school timetable in games) to make the unknowns feel familiar. These moments planted the seeds for positive anticipation, not anxiety.

“My sister likes it and she's made a bunch of new friends”

Carers' perceptions reflected the students' descriptions, with 83% mentioning ‘Being more grown up’, ‘Having or choosing different classes’, and ‘Freedom’ as what their child was looking forward to. Most carers (75%) said their child was looking forward to making new friends and attending school events.

A larger percentage (67%) of carers expressed concerns about their child being bullied, pressured to do something they did not want to do, or not fitting in. At least half of carers also voiced worries about their child's homework (58%), making friends (50%), or attending a bigger school (50%). The youth worker observed that carers often carried a heavy mental load—juggling work, multiple children, and constant school emails. By using diverse communication methods and keeping updates simple but personal (e.g., a photo of a child engaging in a new activity), she found even brief contact could relieve stress and build trust.

Most students predicted that friends would be the most important support to help them transition. A few mentioned siblings, older mentors, and teachers. Their carers also believed friends would be significant but emphasised other school-based supports and self-management skills such as flexibility and avoiding putting too much pressure on themselves.

Methods and Key Findings.

Findings - Post Program

A positive shift in students' sense of school connection is evident. Prior to the program, **48%** of students said they liked school either a lot or a little; this increased to **80%** afterwards. Similarly, **75%** of students initially reported feeling a sense of belonging at school, which rose to **94%** following the program. The desire for high marks stayed consistent, at **70%** before and **71%** after the program.

Relationships with teachers were generally good before and after the program with 77% of students reported getting along well with their teachers at the end of the program—similar to pre-program levels (73%). However, this should be viewed in context. In primary school, students have up to six years to build relationships with a small number of teachers. In contrast, these new high school connections were only a few months old at the time of the survey. The sustained positivity in teacher relationships underscores the importance of early relational support provided by the Peer Bridge program. Students and carers credited the program with aiding in the transition.

The consistent presence of the youth worker played a key role in this transition. By maintaining communication with students, carers, and school wellbeing staff, the youth worker helped ensure each student's strengths, preferences, and concerns were recognised, fostering a smoother, more personalised entry into the high school environment. The qualitative data also showed that students were developing a stronger sense of autonomy and independence.

“I like how it is more independent than primary school, and I have lots of friends here”

“Having lots of freedom and lots of teachers.”

These expressions of growing independence were supported by the program's emphasis on agency, choice, and confidence-building. The youth worker helped scaffold this shift by creating opportunities for students to explore the new school environment safely and to build a sense of competence before the year formally began.

There was a difference between students who had one-on-one mentors and those who participated in the group-based program in how much they liked school (94%, 67% respectively), and a lesser, reversed difference in their desire for good marks (69% and 79% respectively). There were no meaningful differences between students with mentors and those in the group-based program regarding their sense of belonging (100% and 95%) or their ability to get along with teachers (76% and 78%).

Carers also saw their children having a positive change, with 88% saying their child liked school and felt like they belonged there. This is an increase from before the program, when 58% of carers believed their child liked school and 73% thought their child felt they belonged at school. Similarly, 88% believed their child was getting along well with teachers. Carers consistently noted that having a known, approachable adult, outside the school system, helped them feel more informed and less isolated. Regular check-ins, updates, and encouragement helped many families feel that they weren't navigating the transition alone.

After the program, students mainly expressed positive feelings about their high school, including feeling happy (66%), excited (37%), and curious (23%). Similar to before the program, a small group also experienced **several negative emotions**, such as feeling sad (17%), worried (6%), angry (6%), lonely (6%) or afraid (6%). These students were not necessarily disengaged from school—liking and belonging or even getting on with teachers were not always linked—but the qualitative data revealed some of their concerns, indicating that worries about academic performance may be motivating some of their negative feelings.

“Because we have too many tests”

“Failing (afraid)”

Homework was the most commonly described as the hardest thing about getting used to the new school (37%), with a higher proportion of the students in the group-based cohort (44%) versus 29% in the mentoring cohort nominating homework as the hardest thing. Hard classes were nominated by 11% of the students, with a larger proportion of students with mentors (18%) compared to those in the group-based cohort (6%). A total of 14% students listed missing old friends, 18% of those with mentors and 11% of those in the group-based cohort. No other items were endorsed by at least 10% of the students.

Carers' concerns decreased by the end of the program, with the most common worries about their child being homework (38%), making friends (25%), getting along with teachers (25%) or fitting in (25%). Notably, no parent voiced concerns about bullying after the program, compared to 67% beforehand. Additionally, the proportion of carers worried about their child being pressured into doing something they didn't want to do dropped to 50% after the program, from 67% before. Importantly, carers credited these shifts not just to the passing of time, but to the relational continuity offered by the program. The youth worker's consistent communication helped demystify high school processes and reassured carers that someone was paying close attention to their child's wellbeing.

The relational support given to carers also helped protect students from stress. Program staff observed that carers under high stress or uncertainty, whether from work pressures, mental load, or unfamiliarity with the high school system, had to work hard to provide emotional reassurance to their children. By actively engaging these carers and providing calm, steady communication, the youth worker indirectly boosted student outcomes. A less worried, better supported carer was in a better position to create a stable home and support positive attitudes about the transition.

Friends play a vital role in helping students settle in. Most students (74%) reported having a best friend at school. Similarly, 77% said their friends helped them adjust to their new school. There was a slight difference between students with one-on-one mentors and those in the group-based cohort regarding having a best friend at school (71% and 78%, respectively). Both groups relied on friends to help them adapt to the new environment (76% and 78%, respectively).

Parents and carers were mentioned as helping with the transition by 34% of students, with a higher proportion of the group-based cohort nominating parents or carers as assisting with the transition (44%) compared to 23% of those with mentors. Other relatives were nominated by 26% of students as helping them transition. The program also supported some of these connections. The youth worker's outreach helped some carers feel more confident in offering guidance or asking questions, especially if they were unfamiliar with the new school's systems.

Potential school-based aids, such as wellbeing staff (14%) and teachers (11%), were less commonly nominated by students as assisting with the transition, suggesting that students may be less aware of all available resources.

A majority (60%) of students nominated participating in the Bridge program as helping them adjust, with 65% of those in the mentoring cohort and 56% in the group-based program agreeing.

Students were asked about the two best aspects of the program. While food was the most frequently mentioned favourite, students also highlighted the importance of connections, feeling supported, and enjoying tangible social activities like rock climbing. Similarly, when asked for suggestions for next year, most responses focused on keeping the food and activities.

In hindsight, carers widely credited the Peer Bridge Program as a key factor in their child's successful transition. All carers (100%) stated the program was helpful for their child. Confidence was the most frequently mentioned outcome for their children after participating in the Bridge program. Carers also reported that the program was helpful for themselves (100%). Some mentioned they did not initially think the program was necessary but found it valuable, while others said it helped reduce their anxiety.

“When it first came up, I thought it would be for higher needs kids, but the principal recommended it, and I ended up being very grateful. Even coming from a strong situation, I think they benefited”

“Helped my anxiety. It took a lot of that away. Especially because it was before the year started. Especially as he did it with his already established peers”

“I felt supported ... a program designed to help them with transitioning to high school”

“If they went to Newtown public, they may know some people here. Plus, having a mentor might have helped.”

Methods and Key Findings.

Several carers commented that the program helped their child begin the year with a sense of emotional safety and familiarity. This was especially important for students who might otherwise have felt overwhelmed by the new environment. The personalised and positive contact from the youth worker was frequently mentioned as helping build this foundation.

The following table summarises key outcomes for students and carers before and after taking part in the Peer Bridge Program.

Table 1: Summary of Student and Carer Outcomes (Pre vs Post Program)

Measure	Students - Pre (%)	Students - Post (%)	Carers - Pre (%)	Carers - Post (%)
Liked school	48	80	58	88
Felt a sense of belonging	75	94	73	88
Got along with teachers	73	77	91	88
Valued getting good marks	70	71		
Carers perception of their child's valuing high marks			55	63
Carers valuing high marks			64	75
Credited Bridge program for adjustment		60		100

The outcomes of the Peer Bridge Program reflect the power of an integrated community-based approach: supportive peer mentoring and group-based activities combined with consistent, relationship-focused engagement from a trusted youth worker. While peer mentors offered relatable guidance and helped students build social confidence, the youth worker provided a steady, adult connection, someone who listened, encouraged, and liaised between carers, schools, and students. Together, these roles helped ensure each student felt seen, supported, and equipped to step into high school with confidence. This integrated model helped maintain continuity for families, build trust in the new environment, and centre the student's strengths and potential throughout the transition.

Mentor Experience

Before the program, 30% of mentors acknowledged that they found the transition to high school difficult themselves, and 17% expected it to be challenging for their mentees. The qualitative data indicates they believed the Peer Bridge program would support mentees during the transition.

“They will know each other plus have a mentor. Started transition early - larger period to adjust. We had a tour and that was it - then had to start school”

Mentors suggested several strategies that could assist the mentee, such as sharing personal stories, role modelling, fostering friendship, giving practical advice, and offering encouragement.

“Helping them out with their timetables. Help them get around the school.”

Mentor-Mentee Relationships

Mentors engaged with students during structured workshop activities, with 62% saying they also met with their mentee at least weekly outside these times, and some reported daily contact. Most noted that contact was more frequent at the start and decreased as the program went on; however, a few kept in touch with their mentee afterwards. Mentors' comments show genuine concern for their mentees and other participants.

“Sometimes just hi in the corridor now, other times I checked in with them. Spoke with them more in the beginning - they had more questions at the start. Becoming more confident now”

“Even more this term, the program has finished too”

“One that still struggles has come to sit with my friend group a couple of times”

Program staff observed that mentors consistently approached their roles with empathy, maturity, and initiative. As one team member reflected, “You could see they were just lighting up when they saw the kids start to come out of their shells... It meant something to them.” This insight speaks to the meaningful relationships that formed, not only in terms of mentee outcomes, but in the genuine pride mentors felt in seeing others grow.

Mentors extend the relational safety net on campus

Mentors also indirectly supported school staff, particularly the Student Support Officer (SSO), whose caseloads are typically extensive. By serving as an additional, near-peer relational contact, mentors helped extend the relational web of care for transitioning students. This was especially valuable in high schools where only one SSO may be assigned to hundreds of students. The complementary role mentors played in easing the SSO's workload may be an important consideration for school leadership.

Mentors offered more than just peer support—they extended the relational safety net on campus. Their involvement complemented the SSO and youth worker's efforts and reinforced a caring ecosystem that was visible to students and school staff alike.

Emotional Support

Mentors reported discussing a range of topics with their mentees, including the mentees' emotional wellbeing and social adjustment. The most commonly mentioned topics were how to make friends, emotional support, and encouragement. They occasionally talked about homework but generally less often about academic matters.

“Making friends was most common, but also how to manage homework, plus encouragement - you'll be ok. Also normalising it is ok to ask for help - from us, teachers, other students”

“Connect and catch up. Checking in with how they are going/feeling.”

These findings indicate that mentors contributed to easing the social and emotional challenges of the transition. They assist mentees in forming friendships, feeling less isolated, and adapting to the norms and social expectations of high school. These relational and emotional contributions were highly valued by program staff, who recognised mentors as central to creating a safe and welcoming culture during the transition period.

Methods and Key Findings.

The program also benefited mentors

All mentors (100%) said they enjoyed being mentors. Every mentor (100%) also reported that they learned something new and improved their leadership abilities through the mentorship experience, and 90% indicated that they benefited from the mentor training specifically. They described enhancing their communication, relationship, and social skills, as well as developing greater patience, empathy, and confidence.

“How to help others, putting their needs first.”

“Communication skills – how to talk to different people and encourage them.”

“Leadership skills, how to help people when upset – or I learned how good I actually was at those things.”

“When in a situation when you have to bring others up and you are the more experienced one, you have to reflect on what you were like when you were younger - mistakes you made and help them avoid that. I can apply that learning to people in my year as well, not just younger people.”

The following is the summary table of mentor outcomes, comparing responses before and after the program.

Measure	Mentors - Pre (%)	Mentors - Post (%)
Found transition to high school difficult (themselves)	30	
Expected mentee to find transition difficult	17	
Liked being a mentor		100
Thought they helped their mentee		90
Improved leadership skills		100
Benefited from mentor training		90

Anecdotal feedback from teaching staff, including those not directly involved with the program, suggested that some mentors themselves showed noticeable behavioural and academic improvements. These mentors, some of whom had previously struggled with engagement or self-regulation, demonstrated increased confidence, pride, and a renewed sense of purpose. Teachers observed better classroom participation and more mature attitudes, highlighting the personal transformation that mentorship can foster, especially for students who might not typically be seen as leaders. These outcomes have reinforced the value of the mentor role and prompted the team to expand the training component for next year, building on this cohort’s insights to better prepare future mentors for group dynamics, emotional support, and sustained engagement.

The Peer Bridge Program was successful in aiding students, carers, and mentors through the transition from primary to secondary school. It supported young people to feel more confident, connected, and ready by using an integrated approach: peer mentoring from relatable, near-age mentors; engaging group-based activities; and consistent, relationship-focused support from a youth worker. This combination created both social familiarity and adult continuity, two protective factors that helped reduce the emotional and relational disruption often felt during this period.

Discussion.

A central factor in success was having a dedicated youth worker who actively built relationships with carers, students, and school staff well before high school began. Many carers expressed feeling disconnected during this period, as they transitioned from the highly relational environment of primary school to the more structured and less personalised setting of high school. The youth worker helped bridge this gap by keeping communication open, sharing strengths-based updates, and making sure that important information about students’ needs and strengths was passed on to high school staff. This continuous support fostered trust and created a sense of safety for families.

Peer mentors played a complementary role by offering authentic, relatable guidance. Their stories, encouragement, and emotional reassurance helped normalise fears and reduce feelings of isolation. Mentors also benefited from the experience, developing leadership, communication, and relationship skills. Supported by the youth worker and program staff, they were able to see themselves as role models and reflect on their own growth through the process.

Strong strengths-based collaboration with primary schools was another defining feature. The program team worked with school staff to co-design participation based on relational insight and inclusive criteria. This ensured the program was framed as an opportunity to thrive, not a sign of concern. Some carers who were initially hesitant later described the early communication and personalised updates as a key part of their own positive experience.

Students formed stronger friendships, felt a greater sense of belonging, and reported positive experiences with the program. Carers observed reduced anxiety and growing confidence, while mentors deepened their empathy, patience, and self-awareness. Both qualitative and quantitative data suggest that the program may support students’ emotional readiness and positive attitudes toward high school. Reflections from students highlighted greater independence, stronger peer support, and reduced anxiety about social and environmental changes. Carers’ overwhelmingly positive feedback pointed to the emotional buffering effect the program offered—not only for their children, but also for themselves.

While the findings are promising, they should be interpreted cautiously. This was a pilot evaluation without a comparison group. Observed changes could also reflect natural developmental processes, broader school support, or peer influence. The small sample size and self-selection also limit generalisability. Still, **the consistent positive feedback from students, carers, and mentors provides strong evidence of the program’s perceived value and acceptability.** The mixed model—combining peer-led and adult-led elements—catered to diverse needs. The positive outcomes for mentors also point to the program’s intergenerational benefits.

Future evaluations could strengthen the evidence base by incorporating a comparison group, expanding the sample, and following students over time. Including teacher perspectives and tracking wellbeing, social, and academic indicators would deepen understanding of the program’s longer-term impact. Lessons from the pilot have already informed future iterations, including expanded mentor training, earlier carer engagement, and strengthened school handover processes. Staff recognised that embedding both youth worker and peer support creates a layered, human-centred model, one that speaks to the real-world emotional and practical needs of transitioning students and their families.

As students move from primary to secondary school, Peer Bridge shows that what matters most isn’t just information or orientation, but trusted relationships, emotional connection, and the knowledge that someone is walking alongside them.

Conclusion and Recommendations.

The Peer Bridge Program provided a successful model for supporting students, carers, and mentors during the transition from primary to secondary school. Its integrated approach, combining peer mentoring, youth worker support, and collaboration with schools fostered stronger relationships, greater student confidence, and enhanced communication between carers and the education system.

Participants consistently reported positive experiences. Students described stronger connections, lower anxiety, and better readiness for high school. Carers highlighted how personalised communication and ongoing support helped them feel more confident, informed, and capable of managing competing demands during their child's transition. Mentors also gained valuable skills and a clearer sense of purpose through their roles.

The youth worker's involvement proved to be a key factor in success, supporting carers, liaising with schools, and fostering relationships that highlighted students' strengths and stories. The program also gained from strong collaboration with primary schools and a delivery model that normalised participation and celebrated student potential. While these findings are promising, future evaluations should aim to strengthen the evidence base through comparison groups, larger sample sizes, and longer-term tracking.

Recommendations.

1. Retain the dual-support model

Continue delivering the program with both peer mentors and a dedicated youth worker. This layered approach offers social and emotional support that adapts to different student needs.

2. Expand and strengthen mentor training

Incorporate mentor feedback to develop training in areas like emotional support, group facilitation, and sustained engagement. Consider peer debriefs or reflection sessions to support mentor growth.

3. Engage carers early and relationally

Maintain and build on early outreach strategies, such as personalised texts, updates, and flexible communication. Position the program as a strength-building opportunity from the outset.

4. Collaborate with primary schools for co-selection

Continue involving primary school staff in identifying students, using their deep knowledge of each cohort to ensure inclusive and respectful selection processes.

5. Strengthen school handover systems

Formalise information-sharing between the youth worker and high school wellbeing staff, ensuring continuity of care and visibility of students' strengths and needs.

6. Enhance data collection and evaluation

Use future program cycles to track academic, wellbeing, and social outcomes over time. Include teacher perspectives and aim for greater scale and comparison to strengthen impact evidence. Include a comparison or control group to help isolate program effects.

7. Support Sustainable Growth

Explore opportunities to expand the program gradually and sustainably, including to other schools. Growth should be paced to ensure that core relational elements such as youth worker engagement, mentor development, and carer connection remain central. Consider partnerships, resourcing needs, and staffing models early to preserve the quality and relational integrity of the program as it scales.

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