

# Principles of practice to support **Student Wellbeing and Mental Health**

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Supporting the wellbeing and mental health of all students includes creating a safe and inclusive whole-school climate, prioritising social and emotional learning through the curriculum, utilising effective methods for identifying, supporting and monitoring students at risk, and providing ongoing professional learning opportunities for educators.

**Student wellbeing** is characterised by a whole-school approach to foster positive relationships and learning experiences. Student wellbeing includes a focus on developing coping strategies, help-seeking skills, self-efficacy and supporting others. In addition, social and emotional learning capabilities are central to maintaining wellbeing and for lifelong success. Wellbeing also encompasses diverse and interacting relationships between the individual, their family and communities, and their associated beliefs, values and experiences.

**Mental health** focuses on the psychological experiences of wellbeing and its impact on how we feel, think and behave. Mental health can be represented as a continuum, with flourishing and optimal functioning on one end, and severe distress and impact on everyday activities on the other.

Both wellbeing and mental health are dynamic, and constantly fluctuate depending on various and interacting internal and external factors.

## Overview

These eleven principles are provided as considerations for schools when supporting the wellbeing and mental health of all students through education, prevention, early identification, intervention, and ongoing support.

- 1 Creating a safe, supportive, and inclusive whole-school school climate
- 2 Implementing high quality evidence-based wellbeing strategies or interventions
- 3 Prioritising and supporting schoolwide education for students focusing on wellbeing and mental health e.g., social and emotional learning, help-seeking strategies
- 4 Creating opportunities for authentic student voice and engagement
- 5 Ensuring that school staff receive regular and ongoing professional learning related to student wellbeing and mental health
- 6 Articulating clearly defined school processes that include identification of emerging signs and indicators, provision of support and regular monitoring
- 7 Undertaking appropriate individual planning processes in collaboration with the school, student, parents/carers and external mental health professionals and practising transparent, timely and open reciprocal communication
- 8 Having a dedicated team or individual at the school as a point of contact for students and their families
- 9 Actively cultivate and encourage proactive parent partnerships
- 10 Supporting staff wellbeing and mental health
- 11 Ensuring ongoing evaluation and opportunities for feedback and improvement for student wellbeing and mental health initiatives and processes in the school

# 1

## Creating a safe, supportive and inclusive whole-school climate

- Create an inclusive school and classroom environment that promotes diversity, respect, and fairness, as well as non-competitive ways of learning.
- Focus on positive and quality connections that foster feelings of safety, support, and trust. A greater ratio of positive to negative interactions with teachers has been shown to increase student engagement in schools (i.e., academic participation, school enjoyment, and educational aspirations; Martin, Marsh, McInerney, & Green, 2009; Martin & Collie, 2018).
- Build a culture of help-seeking for all school staff and students.
- Schools may consider creating a physical safe space for students to “take a break” during the day when needed. This may help promote self-regulation.
- Experiences of high stress or trauma elicits feelings of helplessness and unpredictability. Therefore, it is important that the school environment is a safe, stable, and supportive place for students to express themselves, process their experiences and emotions, and cultivate a sense of agency and control.

# 2

## Implementing high quality evidence-based wellbeing strategies or interventions

- Wellbeing strategies or interventions based on demonstrated success can improve protective factors for wellbeing such as social and emotional learning skills, self-esteem, pro-social behaviour, internalising problems, and academic performance (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, & Schellinger, 2011; Mertens, Dekovic, Leijten, Van Londen, & Reitz, 2020).
- The intervention design should consider factors that have demonstrated increased intervention effectiveness and consider barriers to its success.
- If an intervention is implemented, consider who will design the implementation plan and consider whether they have a background in translating research into practice.

# 3

## Prioritising and supporting schoolwide education for students focusing on wellbeing and mental health e.g., social and emotional learning, help-seeking strategies

- Research observes that explicitly teaching students social and emotional skills is key for enhancing student wellbeing, as well as learning positive help-seeking and coping strategies and gravitating less towards anti-social or self-harming behaviour, and substance use (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017).
- Social and emotional learning fosters the development of five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioural competencies, these are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. These skills are crucial to goal achievement, working effectively with others, and regulating emotions (CASEL, 2020).

- Long-term behavioural change is more likely to be successful when initiatives or strategies are evidence-based and ongoing (Runions, Pearce, & Cross, 2021). Rather than conducting short-term wellbeing and mental health initiatives or one-off presentations from external support providers, developmentally appropriate social and emotional skill building should be explicitly taught and practised through the school curriculum and co-curricular activities.
- Barriers to help-seeking for students and their families experiencing poor mental health and illness include social stigma and discrimination. Improving wellbeing and mental health literacy (e.g., education on how to maintain positive wellbeing, signs and symptoms of poor mental health, and help-seeking strategies) may reduce the associated stigma of mental health difficulties (Goodsell, 2017).

## 4

### Creating opportunities for authentic student voice and engagement

- Create a school environment and climate where learners feel comfortable authentically voicing their perspectives (Graham, 2018).
- Allow students the opportunity to work with other peers and school staff to have an influence on positive changes at the school (Graham, 2018). When teachers work in partnership with their students, it improves their ability to meet students' needs and increase levels of wellbeing (Mitra, 2003; Runions, Pearce & Cross, 2021).
- Provide a variety of methods for students to raise questions, concerns, and feedback (e.g., via spoken dialogue and writing, collectively and/or individually). Providing multiple opportunities for questions and feedback can promote inclusivity, respect, and equity to all student voices (Powell, Graham, Fitzgerald, Thomas, & White, 2018).
- Maintain ongoing communication between students and school staff (Graham, 2018).
- Ensure a process to address and act upon student concerns and questions is available.

## 5

### Ensuring that school staff receive regular and ongoing professional learning related to student wellbeing and mental health

- Educate school staff about the evidence supporting wellbeing outcomes which is essential to support successful implementation of wellbeing approaches.
- Organise regular and ongoing professional learning opportunities for educators to build staff capability related to wellbeing, mental health and trauma-informed practice.
  - Trauma-informed practice involves understanding the influence of mental health and trauma experiences on learning and behaviour and recognising the signs and symptoms of trauma, neglect, or abuse. Signs that children are struggling can look different depending on the individual, or their developmental stage.

- One main concern from teachers when supporting students who are experiencing mental health difficulties is that they will say the wrong thing and make things worse (Cooley, 2017). Place teachers at ease with the knowledge that a “caring, calm, stable presence is often the main need for the young person experiencing a mental health emergency” (Cooley, 2017). Equipping teachers with strategies to draw on when having conversations with students about their mental health needs is an important part of this professional learning.
- Provide ongoing professional learning opportunities to allow educators multiple opportunities to ask questions, provide feedback and learn from other educators.

## 6

### Articulating clearly defined school processes that include identification of emerging signs and indicators, provision of support and regular monitoring

- Ensure transparent, consistent, and clear policies, processes, and procedures for responding to students who may need additional mental health support.
- Ensure an effective and standardised orientation regarding the schools’ procedures when dealing with mental health emergencies for new staff.
- Ensure all staff are aware of and follow internal referral procedures for students of concern.
- Implement early risk identification methods and regular monitoring of at-risk students. Processes for screening students could be put in place to identify protective (e.g., social connection) and risk factors (e.g., anxiety, irritability, sadness, poor attendance).
- Ensure school staff are competent in identifying and managing risk, knowing how and when to respond to mental health difficulties.
- Clear anti-bullying policies and procedures and ongoing training for staff in creating safe environments and positive behaviour interventions.
- Schools ensure they have comprehensive eSafety policies with clear consequences for breaches (refer to the [Best Practice Framework for Online Safety Education](#) from the Office of the eSafety Commissioner).

## 7

### Undertaking appropriate individual planning processes in collaboration with the school, student, parents/ carers and external mental health professionals and practising transparent, timely and open reciprocal communication.

- Appropriate planning processes are those which work towards reducing the experience or intensity of mental health difficulties, as well as providing adequate and timely intervention.
- Consent from the family for the school to liaise with external mental health professionals facilitates the planning undertaken for the student.
- Teachers should conduct regular check-ins with at-risk students to identify needs and preferences.

- Provide easy access to mental health resources and practitioners. On average, mental health service use has been linked with improved academic performance amongst students with a mental disorder (Goodsell, 2017).
- Create plans to support the transition back to school for students who have had time away from school due to mental health difficulties. This might look like changing school attendance times, allowing increased rest breaks, providing extra time for class activities, extending deadlines, and adjusting the classroom environment and communication methods according to the students' needs (Cooley, 2017).

## 8

### Having a dedicated team or individual at the school as a point of contact for the students and their families

- Establish a dedicated leadership team to drive whole-school wellbeing.
- It is critical that the team members and/or individual are approachable, empathetic, demonstrate outstanding interpersonal skills, and shows interest in student wellbeing.
- Identify the key team or individual at the school for students who may be experiencing mental health difficulties. This team may be made up of the wellbeing leaders, school counsellors/psychologists and school executive.
- This team or individual can identify when a student requires referral to further professional mental health intervention and/or treatment. Refer to clear policies and referral procedures.
- Ensure all school staff, students, and parent/carers know to contact this team/individual in relation to any wellbeing and mental health concerns or queries.

## 9

### Actively cultivate and encourage proactive parent partnerships

- Provide parents/carers opportunities for decision-making in school wellbeing initiatives. Whole-school wellbeing interventions that have involved families in the process were more effective in improving the school climate than those that did not (Mertens et al., 2020).
- Create opportunities for parents/carers to voice their opinions and raise concerns.
- Families can play a critical role in educating and supporting young people, both in and out of school. Where possible, share information with families and be in regular communication with them. This will provide support to families, as well as opportunities to draw from their insight into their child's life.
- Actively cultivate parent/carer partnerships by creating methods for parents to make suggestions.
- Provide parents/carers mental health education opportunities to increase understanding of wellbeing and mental health difficulties, as well as to feel more confident in knowing when and how to respond.

## 10

## Supporting staff wellbeing and mental health

- When staff wellbeing is supported, it has a positive impact on staff retention, quality of performance and classroom instruction, classroom climate and capacity to engage and effectively teach (Roeser et al., 2013; Wolf et al. 2015). Therefore, it is essential that measures are put in place to identify teacher needs and prevent burnout and distress.
- The following preventive measures to promote teacher wellbeing are recommended:
  - Provide regular opportunities for staff to connect with each other and share experiences and challenges (Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996).
  - Teach skills that increase wellbeing (e.g., cognitive-behavioural strategies, mindfulness and relaxation, social-emotional skills, help-seeking and professional learning; Cheon et al., 2014; Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Flook et al., 2013; Iancu et al., 2018; Jennings et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2013).
  - Provide opportunities to receive support from senior staff and management (Roeser et al., 2013).
  - Ensure staff receive appropriate recognition for their work.
- It is important to acknowledge that supporting students who are experiencing mental health difficulties can be distressing to school staff. It is critical that school staff are provided support and debriefing opportunities after an incident or challenging experience.
- Processes to support staff wellbeing should be developed in consultation with school staff and school leadership.

## 11

## Ensuring ongoing evaluation and opportunities for feedback and improvement for student wellbeing and mental health initiatives and processes in the school

- Regularly monitor the progress of student wellbeing and mental health initiatives and processes (e.g., processes involving risk identification and monitoring, student re-integration into school, and wellbeing initiatives) and adapt program components accordingly (e.g., use the plan, do, check, and adjust cycle aimed at continual improvement).

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