

HOW CAN SCHOOLS SUPPORT WHOLE-SCHOOL WELLBEING?

A Review of the Research

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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The Australian Student Wellbeing Framework (ASWF) has progressed the vision of Australian schools as “learning communities that promote students’ wellbeing, safety and positive relationships so that students can reach their full potential”. Student wellbeing has been defined as a “positive sense of self and belonging and the skills to make positive and healthy choices to support learning and achievement, provided in a safe and accepting environment for all students”.



How can schools support student wellbeing? The ASWF focuses on active leadership, authentic student involvement, cultivation of a supportive setting for positive behaviour, partnerships with families and the broader community, and a school community that is inclusive and respectful. To support these goals, the Association of Independent Schools of NSW has established the [Compass: Navigating Whole-school Wellbeing initiative](#). Working collaboratively with schools through in-school engagements and professional learning, AISNSW staff will support schools to select evidence-based strategies and implement a whole-school vision and approach to wellbeing over 12-18 months.

The current report aims to assist schools to identify and implement evidence-based whole-school proactive wellbeing approaches that foster safe, supportive, and respectful environments so that wellbeing outcomes are enhanced now and in the future. This rapid literature review aims to inform the core AISNSW wellbeing work to support independent schools by providing an overview of the current state of evidence for whole-school approaches to wellbeing.

The key questions of this review are:

1. How effective are whole-school student wellbeing approaches in improving student wellbeing outcomes and academic performance?
2. What are the implementable elements and/or characteristics of effective whole-school approaches to student wellbeing?

To answer these questions, a search of meta-analysis and systematic reviews addressing whole-school approaches to student wellbeing was conducted for the years 2006-2020. Additionally, a systematic review of new research studies published between 2016-2020 was conducted to identify the cutting edge of school interventions to support student wellbeing.

Three meta-analyses and four systematic reviews were identified. These indicated that, on average, school-based programs focusing on social and emotional learning showed an overall significant impact on a range of outcomes including positive social behaviours, emotional wellbeing and academic achievement. Programs were effective overall for both primary and secondary levels. Whole-school interventions have been shown to be effective overall for social emotional learning outcomes, behavioural adjustment and in reducing internalising problems.

Six relevant new studies were identified published in the last five years. The Australian Friendly Schools and the Strengthening Evidence-base on School-based Interventions for Promoting Adolescent Health Programme (SEHER) program in India have shown efficacy in improving wellbeing-related outcomes, but two other large-scale trials failed to show an impact. This highlights the variance in how well interventions work and is a reminder that not all programs are effective. Thus, it is imperative to consider factors that are related to successful wellbeing interventions. The review of implementation factors associated with successful student wellbeing interventions provided a rich set of recommendations.

1. Adopt a Whole-School Approach

Multicomponent and multileveled interventions that include the whole school community including parents/carers have been effective, especially when they provide adequate implementation support. This includes establishing effective leadership and implementing strategies with sufficient duration and intensity. Whole-school initiatives that are led by a team constituted of school leadership, teachers, parents/carers, and students are most likely to succeed.

2. Focus on Interventions with Evidence of Effectiveness

Not all interventions will work. Choose an intervention with a robust evidence base. Interventions that build problem-solving skills, personal insight, and opportunities for the practice of new skills and engaging multimedia activities to reinforce learnings appeared to be most effective. Interventions that explicitly teach social and emotional skills are recommended. Such skills are highly linked to overall student wellbeing. Social and emotional learning curriculum interventions that are Sequential, Active, Focused and Explicit (SAFE) have been shown to be more effective than those that are not.

3. Establish a Dedicated Leadership Team to Drive Implementation

Different schools have different needs. A key first question is who will drive the intervention? Some studies have success with teacher-led implementations; others work better with a dedicated individual appointed to oversee it, often the case in whole-school interventions. Hand-in-hand is finding the right person for the task. Analyses of implementation success and failure point to the need for the key facilitators to be approachable and unambiguously interested in the students' wellbeing. Finally, although fidelity to the intervention is important, so too is the opportunity to adapt the intervention to the local context as needed, based on the awareness and expertise of the school facilitators and oversight team.

4. Prepare the School and Staff Early

A key to successful implementation is sharing evidence and promoting the need for the whole-school intervention. A lack of buy-in from educators is a fundamental challenge to a whole-school intervention. Ideally, educators will feel a burning desire to do something new to support student wellbeing. This helps to ensure meaningful whole-school action at sufficient dosage. Token efforts will not work; space may need to be found in a crowded curriculum to ensure the intervention is meaningfully delivered. To support this, schools should train often and train well, as rigorous professional learning is essential for whole-school interventions. It is important to note that in both the Australian and NSW Curricula, social and emotional learning is embedded through key learning areas via personal and social capabilities and the [NSW Personal Development, Health and Physical Education \(PDHPE\) K-10 Syllabus](#).

5. Provide Meaningful Engagement with Families

Families are essential partners in student wellbeing. Engaging families early in planning and oversight of the whole-school intervention is recommended. To best engage families, a strong hook is recommended, one that speaks to their concerns.

6. Create Meaningful Opportunities for Student Voice and Engagement

If an intervention is about students, it should not be done without students being involved in meaningful ways. Students whose wellbeing is at risk may also benefit from targeted wellbeing support. "Nothing About Us Without Us" is the motto.

In sum, careful implementation of whole-school wellbeing interventions can ensure that student wellbeing is maximised, and students have the best opportunity to reach their fullest potential.

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AISNSW WELLBEING LITERATURE REVIEW

Supporting whole-school
wellbeing approaches



The Association of Independent Schools of NSW