

## Beyond Blue submission to the Productivity Commission's Interim Report from the Review of the National Schools Reform Agreement

21 October 2022

### Introduction

- Beyond Blue welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's Interim Report from the Review of the National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA). This submission draws on Beyond Blue's experience in designing, delivering and evaluating Be You, the Commonwealth's national mental health in education initiative. We have consulted with our Be You delivery partners, Early Childhood Australia and headspace, to inform this submission.
- Beyond Blue commends the Productivity Commission's focus on student wellbeing in the Interim Report.
- Beyond Blue strongly supports the inclusion of student wellbeing in the next NSRA. This must be supported by consistent, measurable and publicly reported outcome measures, so that the effect of implementation effort is measured and adjusted as necessary.
- Our submission responds to **Information request 4.1** (National Policy Initiatives to improve student wellbeing).
- We recommend **three critical steps** that the Australian, State and Territory Governments should take in the next intergovernmental agreement to improve student wellbeing:
  1. Replace the current confusing and fragmented policy and investment approach to supporting mentally healthy learning communities with an integrated and coordinated one.
    - An immediate, pragmatic start can be all governments implementing Be You, as the national mental health in education initiative. This national, Commonwealth-funded initiative and Commonwealth investment can be leveraged and amplified through complementary investments by states and territories that are well integrated with the Be You framework and approach.
  2. Provide more support for schools and teachers to implement and embed Be You and other mental health and wellbeing supports through:
    - Funding designated wellbeing support and integration roles in all schools
    - Allocation of paid time for teachers to undertake professional development
    - Increased full-time-equivalent (FTE) allocation to enable teachers and school leaders to implement learnings from professional development in practical settings.
  3. Ensure that high quality wellbeing curriculum is consistently included in all initial teacher education.

### Background

- Beyond Blue's vision is that all people in Australia achieve their best possible mental health. For children and young people, education is a critical setting where mental health and wellbeing can be supported.

- There is a critical and enduring need for educators to be responsive to the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, which has been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic and natural disasters.
- Be You: the national mental health in education initiative<sup>1</sup> supports early learning services and schools to develop positive, inclusive and resilient learning communities where every child, young person, educator and family can achieve their best possible mental health. The initiative:
  - equips educators to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people from birth to 18 years, providing an end-to-end approach for early learning services, primary schools, and secondary schools across Australia;
  - promotes mental health literacy and wellbeing, and works to prevent mental health issues and suicide through early intervention and critical incident response and support;
  - supports educators' wellbeing and equips them with the knowledge and skills to support students' mental health and embed social and emotional learning into their pedagogy.
- In line with global best practice, Be You promotes a long-term, whole learning community approach through planning and implementation tools and expert Be You Consultant support.<sup>2</sup> The most effective social and emotional learning interventions and outcomes are embedded in the ethos of early learning services and schools involving educators, students, and families
- Be You launched in November 2018, bringing together - in a single end-to-end initiative - several previously separately funded Commonwealth programs. The aggregation of these programs has delivered considerable impact and value. To date, Be You has registered almost four times the number of schools than its predecessor programs, and achieved a ten-fold growth in early learning centres.
- In only three and half years, 70% of all Australian schools and 33% of early learning services have registered as Be You learning communities. In addition, over 160,000 educators and people studying education have signed up to Be You. These are well above targets, demonstrating the appeal of and utility of Be You to educators.
- The value of Be You is clear from independent evaluation and research. Be You schools have seen increased NAPLAN scores, compared to schools not involved; and students engaged in Be You secondary schools are significantly more likely to have improved social and emotional wellbeing scores.<sup>3</sup> Be You educators report being more confident than non-users at supporting children and young people's mental health.<sup>4</sup>
- Further information about Be You is attached.

**Recommendation 1: Replace the current confusing and fragmented policy and investment approach to supporting mentally healthy learning communities with an integrated and coordinated one.**

- **An immediate, pragmatic start can be all governments implementing Be You, as the national mental health in education initiative. This national, Commonwealth-funded initiative and Commonwealth investment can be leveraged and amplified through complementary investments by states and territories that are well integrated with the Be You framework and approach.**

<sup>1</sup> [www.beyou.edu.au](http://www.beyou.edu.au)

<sup>2</sup> Patel V et al. (2018). The *Lancet* Commission on Global Mental Health and Sustainable Development. Volume 392. Issue 10157. Giles-Kaye A et al. (2022). Supporting children's mental health in primary schools: A qualitative exploration of educator perspectives. *The Australian Educational Researcher*.

<sup>3</sup> Dix KL et al. (2022). Be You Evaluation Final Report: from launch until mid-2021. Report for Beyond Blue. Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne.

<sup>4</sup> IPSOS. (2020) Be You Educator Research for Beyond Blue, unpublished.

## Rationale:

- Aligning jurisdictional investments and approaches with the Be You framework across all jurisdictions will ensure a consistent national approach to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, while also allowing flexibility for local jurisdictional context. This approach will avoid unnecessary duplication and reduce system complexity.
- This can be easily implemented, as Be You was deliberately designed to align with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, the Standard for Principals, the Australian Curriculum, and state and territory wellbeing frameworks.
- The complexity of the education and wellbeing policy, investment and practice landscape has been identified as a key issue in numerous reports, reviews and strategies.<sup>5</sup> It is also recognised in the Productivity Commission's Interim Report. This landscape is challenging for education departments, schools and teachers to navigate. The "crowded space" on the practice side is also a key issue with a multitude of programs and initiatives.
- Many of these programs have limited evidence as to their effectiveness. This results in confusion in schools and early learning services about which programs to implement, and it increases the risk of schools and early learning services implementing programs that will not improve wellbeing.
- The Commonwealth Government has invested significantly in Be You (\$138 million over 6 years) to date. This investment has ensured Be You is the leading wellbeing initiative for schools and early learning services, that it has significant reach and engagement across the nation, and that Be You is based on the latest evidence for what works to support wellbeing in education.
- Be You supports schools to develop a comprehensive approach to mental health and wellbeing that includes wellbeing resources, connection with educator networks and helping schools navigate the complex mental health in education space. This enables schools to develop a plan to implement Be You that is tailored to local context and addresses the specific needs of their school and learning community.
- However, the ultimate success of Be You requires it to be fully integrated and embedded into the whole education system and connected to the children and young people's mental health system.
- Continued funding of Be You will support the Productivity Commission's recommendation to incorporate wellbeing in the next intergovernmental agreement, and measure student wellbeing as an outcome. It will also support the delivery of several other Australian Government strategies and frameworks, and achieve recommendations outlined in major national inquiries. For example: Be You will help deliver on the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy in the education sector (refer attachment).
- As the Interim Report highlights, there is currently a significant disconnect between national, state and territory policy reforms and what is happening on the ground in schools across the country. Implementing Be You as the national mental health initiative through commitments in the next NSRA can help address this disconnect.
- The Be You team can support state and territory Education Departments to develop tailored implementation plans to deliver Be You in a way that aligns to jurisdictional initiatives and priorities. For jurisdictions that have already made significant investments towards student wellbeing, the development of an implementation plan could be a 'light touch' approach. More focused implementation planning can be provided to jurisdictions that identify themselves as benefiting from this approach.

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<sup>5</sup> Productivity Commission 2020, *Mental Health*, Report no. 95, Canberra, State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, February 2021, The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, Canberra, 2021.

**Recommendation 2: Provide more support for schools, teachers and school leadership to implement Be You and mental health and wellbeing supports through:**

- **Ongoing funding for designated wellbeing support and integration roles in all schools**
- **Allocation of paid time for teachers to undertake professional development**
- **Increased full-time-equivalent (FTE) allocation to enable teachers and school leaders to implement learnings from professional development in practical settings**

**Rationale:**

- School leaders and educators face new demands due to the expectation that they play a larger role in supporting children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing. Even for those not directly involved in delivering wellbeing programs, Be You's whole-of-setting approach requires them to be equipped with potentially new skills to identify and respond to mental health needs. Educators need to manage these responsibilities with other aspects of their workload such as curriculum planning, classroom delivery, providing feedback and administrative and reporting requirements.
- Schools, school leaders and teachers need adequate resourcing to support students' mental health and wellbeing.
- The issue of educators having sufficient time and resources to support students' wellbeing has been repeatedly raised as key to enabling a mentally healthy education system.<sup>6</sup> This was demonstrated in the Mental Health in Education Survey undertaken on behalf of Be You that found 60% of educators felt time constraints was the most prominent 'barrier' for supporting the mental health of learners.<sup>7</sup> A Be You project looking at Educator Wellbeing also found time constraints significantly impact educators' wellbeing.<sup>8</sup> In turn, educators' wellbeing impacted the wellbeing of children and young people in their learning communities.<sup>9</sup>
- Some jurisdictions have implemented some or part of Beyond Blue's recommendations to provide more support to implement Be You and mental health and wellbeing support. An example of this is in Victoria, the Victorian Schools Mental Health Fund rollout has commenced and Be You has been listed on the Schools Mental Health menu as a tier 1 program. However, Beyond Blue argues that *all* schools across Australia should have equal access to support the implementation of mental health and wellbeing initiatives.
- Creating consistent professional development accreditation processes between jurisdictions would support implementing this approach.
- The Federal Government's election commitment to the Student Wellbeing Boost (\$200 million) could be leveraged to provide funding (in part) for increased resourcing for schools, teachers and school leadership to implement Be You and mental health and wellbeing supports.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Productivity Commission 2020, Mental Health, Report no. 95, Canberra, State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, February 2021, The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, Canberra, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> IPSOS. (2020) Be You Educator Research for Beyond Blue, unpublished, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Reupert, A., Patrick, P., Berger, E., Morris, Z., Diamond, Z., Hammer, M., & Hine, R. (2021). Educator care: Moving beyond self-care. Report produced for Beyond Blue.

<sup>9</sup> Reupert, A., Patrick, P., Berger, E., Morris, Z., Diamond, Z., Hammer, M., & Hine, R. (2021). Educator care: Moving beyond self-care. Report produced for Beyond Blue.

<sup>10</sup> Australian Labor Party, "Labor's Plan to Help Our Schoolkids Bounce Back": <https://www.alp.org.au/policies/help-schoolkids-bounce-back>

***a) Ongoing funding for designated wellbeing support and integration in every learning community***

- Recent reviews and inquiries found recurrent themes such as the need for clearer roles and responsibilities, and better linkages between sectors, are required for learning communities to meet the mental health and wellbeing needs of children and young people.<sup>11</sup>
- Some jurisdictions have funded designated wellbeing positions in schools and these roles complement and enhance Be You. Funding a designated wellbeing support and integration role in every school in Australia, on an ongoing basis, would:
  - enable better navigation between mental health and education settings through an understanding of supports available within the local community, when and for whom they are most appropriate, and how to access them.
  - strengthen whole-of-setting approaches to wellbeing by providing on the ground implementation advice and planning.

***b) Allocation of paid time to undertake professional development focused on student wellbeing***

- Funding to enable school leaders and teachers the time to enhance their professional development in mental health and wellbeing is crucial to implementing evidence-based wellbeing initiatives, including Be You.
- It should be noted that due to the workforce supply issues and the lack of casual relief teachers, this recommendation is contingent upon additional funding for a designated wellbeing coordination role and increased full-time-equivalent (FTE) allocation to enable implementation of learnings.

***c) Increased full-time-equivalent (FTE) allocation to enable implementation of learnings from professional development in practical settings***

- More FTE resourcing and increasing the number of administrative and support roles are required for teachers to undertake professional development and implement their learning to support children and young people's wellbeing.<sup>12</sup>

**Recommendation 3: Ensure that high quality wellbeing curriculum is consistently included in all initial teacher education.**

Rationale:

- The Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry found a lack of material that focused on social and emotional learning and mental health in initial teacher education (ITE).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Productivity Commission 2020, Mental Health, Report no. 95, Canberra, State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, February 2021, The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, Canberra, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Hunter, J., Sonnemann, J., and Joiner, R. (2022). Making time for great teaching: How better government policy can help. Grattan Institute; PwC. (2021). How to Transform School Education in Australia over the Next Decade, *The Mandarin*, November 2.

<sup>13</sup> Productivity Commission 2020, Mental Health, Report no. 95, Canberra, p. 194. The Productivity Commission noted the challenge of inconsistent approaches to teacher pre-service training and professional development in mental health and wellbeing: "Governments should update the National School Reform Agreement to include student wellbeing as an outcome for the education system. This would include clear, measurable wellbeing targets. All parts of the education system would be expected to work towards achieving these targets. (Action 5.3): To implement this, Governments should develop guidelines for initial teacher education and professional development programs, to incorporate social and emotional development and mental health. State and Territory teacher regulatory authorities should use the guidelines to accredit providers. (Actions 5.3, 5.4)".

- The inquiry highlighted that if student wellbeing outcomes are included in the NSRA, the whole education system needs to work together towards improving these outcomes. This includes improving the consistency of high-quality wellbeing curriculum in ITE.<sup>14</sup>
- Since the publication of the Productivity Commission’s report, the education sector and Ministers have focused on improving the quality and consistency of wellbeing curriculum in ITE, however there is still room for improvement.<sup>15</sup> While the focus has been on better preparing graduate teachers, the specific changes required for graduate teachers to effectively deliver mental health and wellbeing support have been given minimal consideration.
- Early career teachers require sufficient, formal training embedded in their studies so they are equipped to manage the mental health needs of their students. Doing so will ensure all educators, including early graduates, have the capacity to support the wellbeing of children and young people.
- Be You is exploring how to adapt existing material for the higher education sector and ITE. This draws on pilot work with the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, which found there is a significant opportunity for Be You content to be adapted to the sector to support trainers and students.<sup>16</sup> Existing Be You materials have been trialled with pre service teachers and early childhood educators, to determine how to best tailor content to meet the specific needs of these cohorts.
- Be You’s work in this area could be further progressed to support any commitments in the next NSRA to ensure that high quality wellbeing curriculum is consistently included in all ITE.

<sup>14</sup> Productivity Commission 2020, Mental Health, Report no. 95, Canberra, p. 194.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2021). *Next Steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review*: Canberra.

<sup>16</sup> ACER, Be You for VET: Final Report prepared for Beyond Blue, unpublished, p. 28.