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PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION'S
REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL
SCHOOL REFORM AGREEMENT
INTERIM REPORT

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Orygen welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission's Review of the National School Reform Agreement Interim Report. Orygen's submission will address Information Request 4.1: *Should there be National Policy Initiatives to improve student wellbeing?*

ABOUT ORYGEN

Orygen is the world's leading research and knowledge translation organisation focusing on mental ill-health in young people. At Orygen, our leadership and staff work to deliver cutting-edge research, policy development, innovative clinical services, and evidence-based training and education to ensure that there is continuous improvement in the treatments and care provided to young people experiencing mental ill-health.

Orygen conducts clinical research, runs clinical services (including five headspace centres), supports the professional development of the youth mental health workforce, and provides policy advice relating to young people's mental health. Our current research strengths include: early psychosis, mood disorders, personality disorders, functional recovery, suicide prevention, online interventions, neurobiology and health economics.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING FOR YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

The importance of supporting the mental health and wellbeing of young people cannot be understated. Three-quarters of lifetime mental health challenges begin before the age of 25 and evidence suggests many people who experience mental ill-health during childhood continue to face difficulties into adulthood.^(1, 2)

The second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing found one in seven respondents had experienced at least one mental or neurodevelopmental disorder in the 12 months prior.⁽³⁾ Furthermore, one in six young people 'had used services for emotional or behavioural problems' in the same timeframe. It is worth noting this data is eight years old – the survey was conducted in 2015, well before the COVID-19 pandemic and the public health policies implemented to support the wellbeing of young Australians.⁽⁴⁾

A key consequence of the pandemic was the rapid shift to remote schooling. The shift to online education in both primary and secondary schools – and the sudden removal of access to what is a place of safety and routine for many students – drew attention to the important role schools and teachers play in terms of Australian students' mental health and wellness. Orygen and Mission Australia's *Clusters of COVID-19 Impact* report found remote schooling 'resulted in a reduction in social connections, as well as contact with, and support from, peers, teachers and support workers.'⁽⁵⁾

Although the full impact of the pandemic on young people is not yet known, it is likely to have exacerbated the 'existing difficulties' for young people 'already experiencing, or at-risk of experiencing, social exclusion and/or mental ill-health, while posing new challenges for those previously unaffected.'⁽⁵⁾

THERE SHOULD BE NATIONAL POLICY INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE STUDENT WELLBEING

Orygen commends the Productivity Commission's ongoing work to build student wellbeing into the next iteration of Australia's National School Reform Agreement (NSRA). Orygen agrees with the Commission's assessment that although many schools do have wellbeing programs and policies in place, not all school leaders and teachers feel confident in their ability to support students effectively.⁽⁶⁾ Although the current Agreement acknowledges the general importance of student wellbeing to 'successful education outcomes'; school leaders require clear guidance and targets to inform their decision making.⁽⁷⁾

Orygen supports Draft Recommendation 4.1 – governments should incorporate wellbeing in the next intergovernmental agreement. The new NSRA should also include National Policy Initiatives (NPIs) that clearly define the strategic goals and specific objectives relating to student wellbeing, mental health support, and early intervention.

Adding student wellbeing as an NPI with measurable targets is an important step toward ensuring the wellbeing programs and policies in all Australian schools meet a minimum standard. School leaders will require resources from multiple departments to achieve such standards. Teachers should feel confident, not only in the efficacy of courses they deliver inside their classrooms, but in the accessibility of strong referral pathways into increased support options for students who require more intensive health and psychosocial support.

Incorporating wellbeing into the NSRA also aligns with previous recommendations made by the Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry Report (Action 5.3) and with the priority areas outlined in the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement (Schedule A, Part 1.1).^(8, 9) Integrating the objectives and approaches to student wellbeing across both agreements recognises the intersection and shared responsibility across health and education departments.

Recommendation 1: The next iteration of the NSRA should include NPIs to measure and improve student wellbeing. To ensure a comprehensive and evidence-based framework for trauma-informed school wellbeing programs, the development of student wellbeing NPIs should involve representatives from multiple government departments.

4.1.1 ARE THERE COMMON STEPS THAT THE AUSTRALIAN, STATE AND TERRITORY GOVERNMENTS COULD TAKE IN THE NEXT INTERGOVERNMENTAL AGREEMENT TO IMPROVE STUDENT WELLBEING, OR PROGRAMS THAT COULD BE IMPLEMENTED NATIONALLY?

ENSURING SCHOOL-BASED WELLBEING PROGRAMS ARE TRAUMA-INFORMED

Orygen agrees with Draft finding 4.1, that 'poor wellbeing directly affects students' capacity to learn'.⁽⁶⁾ As the Commission noted in its Interim Report, poor wellbeing is often linked to, and compounded by, trauma.⁽⁶⁾ Students who have been exposed to childhood trauma 'exhibit poorer attention, disruptive behaviours, aggression, hyperactivity and impulsivity, defiance ... as well as depression, anxiety, withdrawal and low self-esteem.'⁽¹⁰⁾ Research shows that 'trauma-informed models in schools and early learning settings have been shown to reduce stress, anxiety and depression among children and adolescents. They can also reduce stress and feelings of helplessness in teachers when responding to trauma exposed students.'⁽¹¹⁾

Recommendation 2: Any wellbeing program/s considered for national rollout employ trauma-informed care models and principles.⁽¹¹⁾ Monash University's Dr Emily Berger outlines five trauma-informed care principles:

- Family belonging, engagement, and attachment.
- School belonging, engagement, and attachment.
- Emotion identification, regulation, and expression.
- Predictable routines, rhythm, and consistency.
- Development of strengths, identity, and choice.⁽¹¹⁾

Opportunities for further exploration:

The Australian Childhood Foundation has led the development of two resource and training packages to enhance the capacity of schools and education providers to respond effectively to the needs of children who have experienced trauma:

1. Making Space for Learning is a guide for trauma-informed practice, published in 2010, to assist schools to unlock the potential of traumatised children and young people to grow and develop at school.
2. SMART (Strategies for Managing Abuse Related Trauma) was developed with Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia and the Indigenous Health Unit at Monash University. The program provides a range of resources to support integrated professional development opportunities (for education settings but also applicable to other contexts such as child protection and residential care), including knowledge and skill-building seminars and an interactive online learning package. The program was funded by the South Australian Government Department of Education and Children's Services.⁽¹²⁾

Dr Berger also suggests three trauma-informed care models already used in Australia that may provide a suitable foundation for the development of a national wellbeing program/s, including:

- The Berry Street Education Model.
- The Attachment, Regulation and Competency Model.
- The Belonging, Routine, Attachment, Capacity and Emotions (BRACE) Model.⁽¹¹⁾

4.1.2 IS KNOWLEDGE IN RECOGNISING AND RESPONDING TO POOR WELLBEING AND TRAUMA SUFFICIENTLY COVERED IN INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION AND TEACHER PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS? IF NOT, HOW MIGHT THIS BE IMPROVED?

SUPPORTING SCHOOL LEADERS AND TEACHERS

Schools are ideally placed to deliver universal wellbeing programs because they reach nearly all Australian children and young people.⁽¹⁾ They also offer regular opportunities to connect with families and support people.⁽¹⁾ Similarly, a meta-analysis of universal school-based interventions in the United States found that teachers and other school staff are equally, if not more, effective at conducting social and emotional learning programs.⁽¹³⁾

Despite this, studies have found teachers feel under-trained and lack confidence in their ability to support students experiencing poor mental health and wellbeing.⁽¹⁰⁾ This further validates the necessity of strong referral pathways into professional health and psychosocial support for students experiencing greater challenges.

The benefits of a wellbeing framework that incorporates external support options are twofold: it allows school leaders and teachers to focus their efforts on education – including the delivery of universal wellbeing programs; and it also ensures they are not required to provide mental health support that far exceeds the scope of their role. Orygen notes that the success of such a framework is dependent upon adequate resourcing and availability of external support options – teachers cannot refer students to professional health and psychosocial supports that do not exist.

Recommendation 3: Orygen supports the recommendation from the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Mental Health that guidelines be developed for teacher training and professional development in social and emotional development and mental health. Orygen also supports the recommendation to develop national guidelines for accrediting social and emotional school programs. These guidelines should place an additional focus on times of high-risk, including support for educational transitions.

Beyond Blue's [be you](#) digital platform is well-placed to support school leaders and teachers to begin implementing teacher training and professional development guidelines.⁽¹⁴⁾ This platform could also be utilised to deliver a national student wellbeing program/s, though its resources should be expanded to better support students experiencing significant mental health and wellbeing challenges. These resources must be developed by individuals or organisations with specialised knowledge or lived experience of these more complex stages of mental ill health.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For further information and follow-up relating to this submission, please contact:

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