



Department of
Education

Shaping the future

Student wellbeing and care

Future directions



Acknowledgement

We acknowledge and respect the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters on which our students live and are educated throughout Western Australia.

We acknowledge and understand that Elders, parents, families and communities are the first educators of their children and we recognise and value the languages, cultures and strengths that Aboriginal children bring to the classroom.

Aboriginal people have a long tradition of teaching and learning through sharing their connections with country, community, language and culture, and through their oral histories, stories and lived experiences that are passed from generation to generation.

We recognise and value the learning that Aboriginal children bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom.

We recognise and value the understanding that Aboriginal people bring to wellbeing, as a holistic concept where connection to land, sea, culture and spirituality all influence wellbeing. We also recognise that social, historical and political factors also affect wellbeing.

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Introduction

Childhood and adolescence have always been exciting and challenging times: the many firsts, the experience of both success and failure, the importance of the friendships formed, the discovery of new interests, the acquisition of new skills and knowledge and the formation of a young person's identity.

Schools occupy an important place in this growing-up process.

The experiences students have at school will have a long-lasting impact upon their beliefs about themselves, their relationships with others and the trajectory of their development.

Given that students spend about 15,000 hours over the course of their schooling in our care, we need to be sure that what is happening in those hours contributes to the wellbeing of every student.

Part of growing up for some young people will also include their first experience of mental health difficulties. We know that of all the adults who have a diagnosed mental illness, half of them began experiencing mental health difficulties before they were 14 years of age – in other words, while they were students in our primary and secondary schools.

The way in which we as a school system respond to these first signs of difficulty is important because the way we respond will affect the resilience, coping strategies and help-seeking of young people lifelong.

Most importantly, the evidence tells us that the longer students stay engaged in schooling, the less likely they are to experience mental health difficulties as adults. Education is a powerful protective factor.

Principals, teachers and allied professional staff in schools have always understood the contribution they can make to the wellbeing of their students. They seek to make students resilient, to believe in their own ability to tackle problems, to access help when it is needed, to have a strong sense of self within both the school and broader community, and to be able to contribute their strengths and feel valued for that contribution.

Over many years, however, the expectation of the role schools should play, and the responsibility school staff should accept for the mental health and wellbeing of their students has become unclear.

Any expectations that school staff will undertake mental health interventions in addition to their teaching responsibilities, not only generates unsustainable workload for staff, it also involves them in operating outside their area of expertise.

It is in the interests of students and their families, school staff and the community at large to clarify the expectations of schools in relation to the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

This paper sets out our position on how schools can best contribute to the mental health and wellbeing of their students.

It also signals to staff the kind of support and guidance that will be provided throughout 2024.

A shared responsibility

The wellbeing of students is a shared responsibility between families, government and non-government mental health services and programs, the community and students themselves. Schools acting alone cannot be expected to deliver all that is required.

The more staff attempt to take on functions that are legitimately the responsibility of families and other government agencies, the more difficult it will be to fulfil their educational responsibilities.

Within the school system, responsibility to act in the interests of students' wellbeing is shared between students, teachers, principals and system leaders.

It also needs to be recognised that education assistants, Aboriginal and Islander education officers, school officers, gardeners, cleaners and other staff all have vital roles in creating safe, caring, inclusive and culturally responsive school environments where students can thrive.

However, teachers should not be expected to also be social workers, psychologists, family counsellors and youth workers.

Teachers must be allowed to focus on their core function, which is teaching. That is what they are trained to do and it is what their students need them to do.

Evidence supports the difference quality teaching and positive teacher-student relationships make to the wellbeing of students.



Supporting schools to meet reasonable expectations

It needs to be acknowledged that staff in schools are already doing a considerable amount to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

Teachers care about their students' overall development and most go above and beyond to ensure that all their students feel safe and supported.

Our expectations for the future do not involve asking more of staff, but rather to focus their energy and commitment on actions they can take as professional educators that will have the most impact on every student's wellbeing.

This can be achieved by providing staff with clear and realistic expectations, along with opportunities to build their capability to meet those expectations.



The impact of schools

The research and evidence shows that there are many things that schools can do within their educational mandate to support the healthy development of all children and young people, and to support those experiencing challenges.

We know that a strong relationship exists between students' experience of connection and belonging in school and their personal wellbeing.

We also know that when students experience mastery and success in some aspect of school life, their wellbeing improves.

Additionally, we know that schools need clear, consistent processes so that students in need are supported.

Based on these understandings, educators have at their disposal a range of strategies in their everyday work that can have powerful effects on their students' wellbeing.

As well as knowing the impact they can have through the way they teach and interact with students, school staff also need a clear understanding of the boundaries of their responsibilities and when they should seek the support of professionals with mental health expertise.

School staff are not mental health professionals and should not be drawn into trying to make diagnoses or taking action to address mental health problems that their educational training does not equip them to take.

The biggest impact that the school can have on a student's mental health and wellbeing is not by focusing on a student's mental health problem and seeking to treat or ameliorate it in some way, but rather to improve the student's ability to function well, and to engage and succeed in the school environment, with or without a mental health diagnosis.

There are 3 ways in which staff can have a real impact on their students' wellbeing that are within their responsibility as educators:

1

Connection and belonging

Fostering positive and safe school environments that create connection and belonging for students.

2

Mastery and accomplishment

Providing high-quality teaching that gives every student a sense of mastery and accomplishment by building on their strengths.

3

Case management and referral

Ensuring that any student who is experiencing difficulties is identified and, in a systematic and planned way, connected to the support they need either inside or outside the school. This includes drawing on support from Statewide Services if required.

It is important that staff are clear about what is expected of them in these three areas and what support is available to assist them in meeting these expectations.



Connection and belonging

Fostering positive and safe school environments that create connection and belonging for students.

Positive relationships are the bedrock of successful schools. In terms of student wellbeing, of particular importance is the relationship between students and their teachers.

Relationships are strengthened when teachers and staff demonstrate that they care about how their students are going academically, socially and personally; when they express confidence in them and help them through their ups and downs by listening to them; and find practical ways to help them stay engaged and positive about their future.

Principals need to create a school environment that helps teachers to build positive relationships with their students. The school environment can help or hinder the strength of relationships through its culture, its structures and its priorities.

Supporting teachers to build positive teacher-student relationships is part of the professional learning associated with the Quality Teaching Strategy.

When teachers know their students, they notice when a student's behaviour changes; when a normally gregarious student seems withdrawn or anxious; or when a student lashes out uncharacteristically.

This may lead the teacher to quietly check with the student to see if they are okay and, if the teacher has concerns, to contact parents or others in the school who have specific care responsibilities.

Teachers and allied professionals have a responsibility to give each student a sense of belonging to the class group.

This means creating a classroom ethos where every student feels that they have a place where they fit, are accepted and valued for who they are and what they bring to the class.

When there are signs that a student is disconnected and struggling to find a place where they can be themselves and have their strengths recognised, effective teachers find ways to strengthen their connection to the group.

This is also a key role for the principal – to build a whole-school culture where all students feel a sense of connectedness to the school community.

The Department will provide guidance for principals on what is meant by a whole-school approach to student mental health and wellbeing, along with professional learning opportunities on how to build such a culture.

2

Mastery and accomplishment

Providing high-quality teaching that gives every student a sense of mastery and accomplishment by building on their strengths.

All students have strengths and school staff have a professional responsibility to help students, especially those who are disengaging, by identifying and building on their strengths.

If teachers adopt high-impact teaching strategies that address both the academic and social-emotional outcomes for all their students, they will have made a significant contribution to their students' mental health.

When a student experiences a sense of accomplishment, in that they have learned a new skill, or developed a sense of confidence in their own capacity to learn, wellbeing improves.

The Quality Teaching Strategy has provided schools with a statement of high-impact teaching strategies (*Teaching for Impact*) and in the years ahead will continue to provide support to teachers and school leaders so that all teachers are adopting classroom practices to maximise the prospects of every student having a sense of mastery and progress.

Many schools also adopt particular wellbeing programs often targeting specific wellbeing outcomes such as resilience, optimism and self-confidence. Provided these programs have an evidence base of their effectiveness, they can add value to the school's overall approach to student wellbeing.

To date, there has been no specific Departmental advice to school staff or leaders on the efficacy of the wide range of programs currently available. The Department will examine the evidence base of identified programs and provide this to schools so that they can make informed choices about adopting such programs, as well as providing guidance on what they may need to consider if implementing a new program in their school.

It is important to recognise, however, that simply adding a wellbeing program to the school's timetable does not on its own constitute an adequate response to the wellbeing needs of its students. Students' personal and social skills are most fully developed in the context of relationships that are built in the everyday interactions between teachers and students.

It is also true that if we want all our staff to build positive relationships with students, then we need to make sure that staff are operating in environments that support their own wellbeing.

It is no coincidence that a school culture that supports teaching excellence based on staff reflection, collaboration, feedback, trust, and learning delivers not only high levels of student achievement and wellbeing, but also high levels of staff wellbeing.

3

Case management and referral

Ensuring that any student who is experiencing difficulties is identified and, in a systematic and planned way, connected to the support they need either inside or outside the school.

Principals understand the need to have a coordinated and carefully managed approach to those students who are showing signs of serious mental health difficulties.

This is critical because no student in the school should be struggling academically and demonstrating risk factors like poor attendance and disengagement, without being attended to.

Serious mental health problems require staff to connect the student to the specialised help they need, and then to play their part in the overall management plan for the student, but this does not mean that school staff should accept primary responsibility for the psychological treatment of those students.

In some instances, school staff will have a specific part to play as part of a larger mental health plan that has been devised by a mental health professional. But in other instances, there is no mental health professional involved, leaving school staff to decide how best to support the student.

In these cases, principals need to make sure that their case management approaches for individual students who have been identified as at risk include planning, ongoing monitoring and follow-up, and that the school's management strategies are reviewed and adjusted as the student's circumstances change.

However, while student wellbeing needs to be a priority, the Department will review the current requirements and practices of staff to both reduce and simplify the expectations for case management and documented planning.

The Department will also support principals and teachers with guidance on internal school processes for the management of at-risk students by clarifying the functions of those in the school with student services responsibilities, including school psychologists.

This guidance will include the need for clear processes for referring to outside agencies at a local level and for building links with the government and non-government support services in their area to the extent that they exist and are accessible to the students and their families.

Many schools have created local collaborative partnerships with community supports and services that enable better access for students and their families. Important future work for the system will be improving interagency cooperation so that there are better wraparound services for the students and families who need them.

The Department will continue to explore collaborative opportunities with our interagency partners to enable a holistic approach to student wellbeing and care.



