



## Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

### ARACY Submission

August 2023

#### About ARACY

ARACY – Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth seeks to catalyse change by bringing people and knowledge together for the benefit of children and young people in Australia. We strive to achieve this by advocating for evidence-based policy and practice, focusing on prevention and early intervention. Our consultations with over 4000 children and young people, their families, and experts have shown us what wellbeing means to them: to be loved, valued, and safe; to have material basics; to be physically and mentally healthy; to be learning; to be participating; and to have a positive sense of identity and culture. These six domains are reflected in ARACY’s wellbeing framework for children and young people — [the Nest](#).

ARACY contributed two submission to the Productivity Commission’s Review of the National School Reform Agreement, and our Nest wellbeing domains were acknowledged in the Commission’s final report as capturing the needs and goals of wellbeing (*Review of the National School Reform Agreement - Study Report, 2022*). We recognise the reciprocal relationship between education/the educational environment and the overall wellbeing of children, and strive to ensure educational policy acknowledges and nurtures this holistically using the best available evidence.

#### Summary of Key Points

- Efforts should be made to include outcomes in the NRSA that extend beyond academic performance. These outcomes should be based on the goals and objectives of the Mparntwe Declaration, and incorporate both objective and subjective indicators i.e. incorporate the perceptions and experiences of students, including primary school students.
- An evidence-based framework for wellbeing such as ARACY’s Nest can enhance efforts of schools, communities, and governments to systemically identify ways wellbeing can be supported within their scope and resourcing.
- Parent and family engagement in learning is a powerful, well-evidenced mechanism to improve student achievement, student wellbeing, and mitigate structural disadvantage and lack of resources. Increasing parent and family engagement across all school communities should be a foundational goal of the next NRSA.
- Hand on Learning is a flexible learning program that has been implemented across 120 mostly disadvantaged schools in Australia. An independent review demonstrates positive outcomes for children disengaged with learning and a very low threshold for cost-effectiveness. We point to this as a program with potential to mitigate educational inequities.

- We point to eiPulse and The Common Approach<sup>®</sup> as two evidence-based wellbeing approaches currently being implemented by schools that should be considered as part of a national reform agenda.
- eiPulse could additionally be utilised as an existing data collection tool to monitor a wellbeing target included in the next NSRA.
- For schools, systems, government, and communities to support wellbeing effectively, students and their families must be consulted. Existing consultation calls for schools to support students in balancing their workload and managing stress, and for schools to take a proactive approach by incorporating mental health literacy into daily learning activities as a means of reducing stigma and raising awareness.
- System-level policy levers for supporting wellbeing include:
  - Enhancing material wellbeing, such as through unconditional cash transfers to vulnerable families, particularly those with children in the early years
  - Supporting parenting and the home learning environment in the first 1000 days, such as through widespread implementation of evidence-based nurse home visiting programs such as right@home
  - Supporting participation in high quality early childhood education and care.
- NAPLAN has been criticised for a variety of unintended consequences for both students and schools with limited evidence for effectiveness in improving outcomes. We recommend that NAPLAN scores are no longer made publicly available to mitigate these negative impacts.
- We recommend the incorporation of regular unstructured play into the school day as one part of an overall shift in the orientation of the education system towards wellbeing, similar to the approach by taken by the Finnish education system. We recognise the limitations this will place on the current curriculum and support modification of the curriculum to facilitate this.
- We support the inclusion of additional priority groups into the NSRA and recommend these be expanded to include young people who experience inequities beyond academic inequities given the inextricable links between wellbeing and educational performance. Strengths-based data and discourse can offset the risk of deficits-framing that could arise from identifying such priority groups.
- Particular priority groups for consideration include young people who identify as gender diverse, given their extremely high rates of mental health symptoms and the powerful potential for school environments to mitigate these through gender-affirming interactions. Another priority group include children and young people in contact with the youth justice system given the protective effects of education on recidivism.

## Response to Selected Questions

### Chapter 2: Improving student outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind

*1. What are the most important student outcomes for Australian school students that should be measured in the next NSRA? Should these go beyond academic performance (for example, attendance and engagement)?*

The NSRA should measure outcomes beyond academic performance. These outcomes should include both objective indicators (such as attendance rates) and subjective indicators which are based on student experiences and perceptions. Subjective indicators enable student voice to contribute to our assessment of progress within the education system, which is not only their human right according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), but is also a rich source of data which can inform and enhance decision-making (Moore, Saunders, & McArthur, 2011).

The indicators should be based on the Mparntwe Declaration (the Declaration) and thereby measure progress towards fulfilling the goals within the Declaration. An example of a relevant subjective indicator based on the Declaration is ‘student experience of discrimination within the school setting’, which speaks to a point within Goal 1 to “provide all young Australians with access to high-quality education that is inclusive and free from any form of discrimination” (*The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, 2019*). An example of a relevant objective indicator based on the Declaration is a measure of academic performance that is internationally comparable (such as PISA scores), which is consistent with the point within Goal 1 to “ensure that Australia’s education system is recognised internationally for delivering high quality learning outcomes” (*The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, 2019*).

The indicators selected should be done so in consultation with appropriately qualified statistical expertise to ensure the indicators are validated for use in student populations.

*2. What are the evidence-based practices that teachers, schools, systems and sectors can put in place to improve student outcomes, particularly for those most at risk of falling behind? Are different approaches required for different at-risk cohorts?*

#### **Family engagement in learning**

There is no doubt that family engagement in learning warrants greater focus in the NSRA.

Student wellbeing and learning are a shared responsibility between families and schools, requiring meaningful communication between the student, family and school. Indeed 50 years of research evidence tells us that when parents and families engage in their children’s learning we see positive impacts on student achievement and wellbeing outcomes. Over the last decade, ARACY has amassed a wealth of expertise in parent and family engagement in learning, highlighting the importance of

consultation, collaboration and relationships between families and schools so together they can develop their collective vision for the learning and wellbeing of each student.

Specific positive outcomes associated with parent and family engagement in learning are detailed in a review by ARACY (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2016), and include that:

1. Family engagement is related to student achievement across all school years
2. Family engagement is also associated with improved wellbeing outcomes
3. Family engagement can mitigate structural disadvantage and lack of resources
4. There may be longer-term economic and social benefits as a result of increasing family engagement.

An [annotated reference list](#) by the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) accompanies their family engagement practice guides (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2021), outlining the extensive evidence base behind these. A [summary of the research evidence](#) on parent engagement in the Australasian context has also been conducted by Evidence for Learning (2016).

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to family engagement, there are a range of proven, evidence-based strategies which schools and ECEC services can use to help foster positive working relationships with children and their families. ARACY's Parent and Family Engagement Implementation Guide for School Communities (Barker & Harris, 2020) provides practical guidance to help Australian schools work more collaboratively with families to ensure students are effectively enabled to learn and participate in their education.

ARACY has also worked with the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) to develop family engagement audit tools and implementation checklists to accompany AERO's family engagement practice guides, which can support schools in their family engagement efforts (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2022a; Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2022b).

### **Progress tracking done differently**

The Productivity Commission's Review of the NRSA found that students falling short of the minimum standards for NAPLAN can "negatively affect students' feelings about themselves and towards learning, and their ability to fulfil their aspirations in later life" (Productivity Commission, 2022). A recent Australian review found that the introduction of NAPLAN has not resulted in improvements in school improvement or individual student learning and growth (Wilson, Piccoli, Hargreaves, Ng, & Sahlberg, 2021). Concerns have been raised that publicising NAPLAN scores for schools reduced an assessment of school performance to performance on a single test, incentivising 'teaching to the test' and thus narrowing the curriculum (Parnis & Petocz, 2016). NAPLAN has also been criticised for masking disadvantage among children and young people who speak languages other than English (Creagh, 2014).

We point to the [National Standardised Assessments for Scotland](#) as an alternative mechanism for individual, school, and national progress tracking. This system utilises standardised assessments in literacy and numeracy coupled with teacher experience to inform student progress. No revision for the assessment is required and there is no pass or fail (Richardson & Krstic, 2021).

### **Unstructured time and play**

A recent systematic review on unstructured play in children aged 3-7 years found that “all studies reported positive impacts on children's physical activity level, social engagement and emotional wellbeing” (Lee et al., 2020). The Finnish education system is one of the most successful in the world, in which children engage in 15 minutes of unstructured, outdoor play every hour throughout the school day (Rhea, 2021; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019). In Finland, children also start school later (at age 7), rarely have homework, and balance academia with creative and physical activities, underpinned by the philosophy of “children’s best interests take precedence over competitive rankings” (Rhea, 2021). Despite – or perhaps because of – this, Finland scores exceptionally well in academic rankings such as the OECD’s PISA (Rhea, 2021). Shifting the approach of education away from academic success and towards nurturing the whole child – meaning less content in the curriculum, and more emphasis on supporting wellbeing holistically – is an internationally successful approach to improving educational outcomes.

### **Flexible learning options**

Flexible learning options can support students who have disengaged from mainstream schooling. An example of an effective Australian program is [Hands On Learning](#), which currently operates across 120 primary and secondary schools along the east coast of Australia. More than half of these schools are located in rural or remote regions, and most are in the lowest socioeconomic areas. Hands On Learning focuses on enhancing social and emotional skills. An independent review found it is an “effective and well managed program delivering positive outcomes for students” with a very low threshold for cost effectiveness (Dandolo Partners, 2022). Costing \$3,700 per student per year, the independent review found that only approximately ~1% of students enrolled in the program needed to graduate school when they otherwise would in order for the program to break even. The same review found that 95% of Hands on Learning students finish school and transition into work or study.

### **SPOT AHAs**

ARACY strongly supports innovative practice such as having Speech Pathology and Occupational Therapy Services (SPOT) Allied Health Assistants (AHAs) in every classroom, and believes this is an initiative worth exploring. This model would be funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and delivered as a universal education setting. Each AHA would be under the supervision of more than one Allied Health professional. For example, one AHA can provide both speech pathology and occupational therapy activities to students within a classroom environment. This model would provide the intensive support many children require, allow earlier identification of previously unrecognised and unassessed learning and development issues among students, enabling supports to be put in place earlier, resulting in a likely significant return on investment. This model would enable classroom teachers to focus more on teaching and less on behaviour management, decreasing teacher stress levels and thereby increasing work satisfaction among teaching staff. As this is an innovative practice within education, there is currently a lack of evidence to point to, although it is becoming increasingly common within health settings with promising evidence (Snowdon, 2020).

*4. Should the next NSRA add additional priority equity cohorts? For example, should it add children and young people living in out-of-home care and students who speak English as an additional language or dialect? What are the risks and benefits of identifying additional cohorts?*

We agree that additional priority equity cohorts should be included in the next NRSR, given that identifying young people with additional challenges empowers decision-making that can address inequities and provide tailored approaches to young people with varying needs. However, we note that the risk of doing so includes the potential to stigmatise more marginalised groups of young people, thereby reinforcing deficits-framing with their particular demographic. However, strengths based data and language has the potential to offset this potential risk.

The Mparntwe Declaration states within Goal 2 that Australian Governments commits to supporting all young Australians to “have a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, cultural, spiritual and physical wellbeing”. Additionally, the NRSR Consultation Paper acknowledges the “inextricable link” between educational outcomes and wellbeing, with good social, emotional, and mental wellbeing associated with higher academic achievement, higher student engagement, and fewer absent days. Thus, ARACY advocates for priority cohorts to be included based on inequities in both academic and other educational outcomes, including significant discrepancies in wellbeing.

One key priority population for consideration is children in contact with the youth justice system. Young people involved with the youth justice system typically face high levels of educational disengagement, while education is a protective factor against recidivism (Armytage & Ogloff, 2017). All young people in custody have a right and, for the majority who are of compulsory school age, an obligation to engage in education. However, not all young people in custody receive equal access to education (White et al., 2019).

Another population for inclusion are children and young people who are gender diverse. Evidence indicates extremely high levels of mental health problems (Telfer, Tollit, Pace, & Pang, 2020). Additionally, gender affirming environments (including educational environments) are known to reduce mental health symptoms (Telfer et al., 2020).

### Chapter 3: Improving student mental health and wellbeing

*8. What does it look like when a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively? What is needed from schools, systems, government and the community to deliver this?*

**For schools, systems, government, and communities to support wellbeing effectively, students and their families must be consulted.**

For schools to support student wellbeing effectively, children and young people must be consulted. Children and young people are experts in their own experiences, and they have a right to have a say in issues that affect them. Evidence indicates that including voices of children and young people in the development, design, and implementation of research, policy, and programs improves the effectiveness of interventions and outcomes for young people (Moore, Saunders, & McArthur, 2011). We recommend asking children, young people, and their families what it looks like to them when schools are supporting their wellbeing effectively. This specifically includes primary-school aged students.

**School challenges are the most common personal challenge faced by high school students in Australia, above mental health and COVID-19. The biggest barriers to study goals are mental health issues, academic ability, and financial difficulty.**

The most recent Mission Australia Youth Survey asked young Australians aged 15-19 years what their biggest personal challenge has been over the last 12 months. The most frequently reported personal challenge – affecting 41.5% of the more than 18 000 respondents – were, which outranked mental health concerns, COVID-19, and relationship challenges. Identified school challenges included academic pressure, high workload, challenges with teachers, and learning difficulties (Mission Australia, 2022). The Youth Survey notes that these responses were unprompted. A similar proportion (41.8%) experienced barriers to achieving their study goals. The biggest barriers to achieving those goals were mental health issues, academic ability, and financial difficulty (Mission Australia, 2022).

**Existing consultation calls for schools to support students in balancing their workload and managing stress.**

The Mission Australia Youth Survey also asked respondents what would help them address school challenges. A common theme among survey respondents was support from schools in equipping them to manage their workload and stress. For example:

*“Having more information about how to deal with school in a balanced way and how to study effectively so you still have time to yourself to do things that make you happy.”*  
(Female, 18, VIC)

*“Teachers helping students to create a study timetable or implement study in class so we don’t spend so much time studying at home when we could do study/homework during the school day.”* (Female, 16 years, NSW)

*“Manage my time better but also learn that it’s ok to take a break and not be studying all the time...Learn some coping techniques and strategies.” (In response to the question ‘What more would help young people address mental health challenges?’) (Female, 16, NT p11)*

Respondents also called for more understanding from both teachers and their families:

*“Having more support coming from teachers in the sense of understanding workloads.” (Female, 16, VIC)*

*“Inform parents about the stress around grades, teachers always say that marks don’t matter but they do to our parents.” (Female, 17, VIC)*

*“Less stress enforced by teachers when it comes to assessments and tests.” (Non-binary, 15, QLD)*

**Students and families call for schools to take a proactive approach to mental health by incorporating education into daily activities as a means of reducing stigma and raising awareness about mental health issues.**

A multitude of sources indicate that students and their families want schools to take a proactive approach to mental health. For example:

*“Education/information at school – helps to reduce stigma. Having a social group, a community of people and leaders who openly talk about mental health and specific places to access mental health support is really helpful. We sometimes had a speaker come to school who acknowledged mental health but didn’t give concrete or specific examples.” Young person, VIC, p51 (National Children’s Commissioner, 2021)*

*“Both children, and parents/guardians and grandparents asked for support for mental health and wellbeing to be built into daily activities and programs at schools rather than just having stand-alone sessions.” (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022)*

*“I think it’s important that schools put more effort into dealing with bullying and mental health issues.” 17 year-old p39 (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2018)*

*“Having more discussions around mental health maybe more of a focus on it at schools. More teenagers go through mental health issues than you think and no one discusses it everyone hides their issues.”- Female, 16, QLD, Mission Australia Youth Survey p11 (Mission Australia, 2022)*

**An evidence-based framework for wellbeing can support schools, communities, and governments to systemically identify ways wellbeing can be supported within their scope and resourcing.**

In terms of a framework for holistically supporting student wellbeing, *The Nest*, was developed by ARACY in consultation with over 4000 children, young people, families, and experts. Based on these conversations, we conceptualised wellbeing as 6 interconnected domains:



- To be loved, valued, and safe
- To be learning
- To have access to material basics
- To be physically and mentally health
- To be participating
- To have a positive sense of identity and culture



Figure 1: ARACY's The Common Approach Wellbeing Wheel, demonstrating The Nest wellbeing domains and their constituents

More can be read about *The Nest* [here](#). This framework can applied at the local level, i.e. for individual schools, through to communities, government, and systems.

Schools already do a variety of things to support wellbeing across the six domains of The Nest. However, it is a useful framework for considering additional or more effective ways that children and young people can be supported holistically. For schools, this means systematically addressing all six wellbeing domains to the best of their ability within their resourcing and capacity. Examples of the ways schools (and the education system more broadly) is already supporting students across these wellbeing domains are in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Framework for enhancing wellbeing in schools.

<b>Valued, Loved &amp; safe</b>	<b>Material Basics</b>
<p><b>Ways schools are doing this already</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools are child-safe places</li> <li>• Schools have mechanisms for responding to disclosures</li> </ul>	<p><b>Ways schools are doing this already</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A large, robust publicly-funded education system</li> <li>• Fee waivers for eligible students</li> <li>• Breakfast clubs</li> </ul>
<p><b>Ways schools, communities, government, and/or systems could enhance this:</b></p>	<p><b>Ways schools, communities, government, and/or systems could enhance this:</b></p>
<b>Participating</b>	<b>Learning</b>
<p><b>Ways schools are doing this already</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal engagement of students through school captains and the student representative council</li> </ul>	<p><b>Ways schools are doing this already</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A robust curriculum</li> <li>• Highly trained teachers</li> </ul>
<p><b>Ways schools, communities, government, and/or systems could enhance this:</b></p>	<p><b>Ways schools, communities, government, and/or systems could enhance this:</b></p>
<b>Positive Sense of Identity and Culture</b>	<b>Healthy</b>
<p><b>Ways schools are doing this already</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nurture and encourage non-academic activities such as sports, music, creativity, games, social activities</li> <li>• Conscientious inclusion of First Nations culture</li> </ul>	<p><b>Ways schools are doing this already</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusion of health and wellbeing concepts in curricula</li> <li>• Availability of school counsellors</li> </ul>
<p><b>Ways schools, communities, government, and/or systems could enhance this:</b></p>	<p><b>Ways schools, communities, government, and/or systems could enhance this:</b></p>

**Broader systems must address student wellbeing holistically, ecologically, and across the life-course. Important policy levers include: addressing material disadvantage, supporting parents and the home learning environment (especially during the first 1000 days), supporting engagement with high quality early childhood education, and supporting parent and family engagement throughout the school years.**

In terms of broader systems change, ARACY made several recommendations to the Productivity Commission's Review of the NSRA. An excerpt from our submission with systems-level policy levers is included below (see Figure 2).

*Figure 2: Excerpt from ARACY's submission to the Productivity Commission's Review of the NSRA (ARACY, 2022c)*

**Enhancing material wellbeing**, given socioeconomic disadvantage is widespread and a key driver of developmental vulnerability and educational inequity. Specific policy initiatives could include consideration of unconditional cash transfers to vulnerable families particularly in the early years given evidence demonstrating enhanced brain function in infancy causally related to cash transfers.

**Supporting parenting and the home learning environment**, given evidence indicating this can help mitigate the impact of early financial disadvantage. Specific policy initiatives could include implementation of evidence-based nurse home visiting programs during the first 1000 days such as [right@home](#), which has demonstrated improvements in parenting behaviours and the home learning environment as well as a trend towards improved language, literacy, and social emotional development at school commencement.

**Supporting participation in high quality early childhood education and care**, given evidence indicating a disproportionate positive impact on developmental vulnerability in children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Supporting parent and family engagement throughout the school years**, given evidence indicating the positive impact this has on educational outcomes.

*9. What evidence-based wellbeing approaches currently being implemented by schools and communities should be considered as part of a national reform agenda?*

#### **eiPulse**

eiPulse is a wellbeing monitoring tool currently implemented across Australia in over 120 schools to close to 100,000 students. Please see our response to Question 10 for more information.

#### **The Common Approach®**

The Common Approach is a professional development program accredited in the ACT for teachers that empowers practitioners to have holistic conversations about wellbeing with children and young people. It is founded on the evidence-based principles of being holistic, strengths-based, child-centred, and collaborative. It is structured on the wellbeing domains of ARACY's *The Nest* (see Figure

1). The Common Approach has been implemented not only in the education sector, but across health and community services. To date, ARACY has trained thousands of practitioners nationally. ARACY was also approached by Finland who undertook a global review and identified The Common Approach as a key mechanism to enhance wellbeing, and has subsequently implemented The Common Approach across the community in Helsinki. Independent evaluation has found that use of The Common Approach results in earlier identification of wellbeing needs, improves relationships between clients and services, and increases referrals to informal services and supports in communities (Hilferty, Newton, & Katz 2012; ARACY, 2013; ARACY, 2014)

*10. Should a wellbeing target be included in the next NSRA? Could this use existing data collections, or is additional data required?*

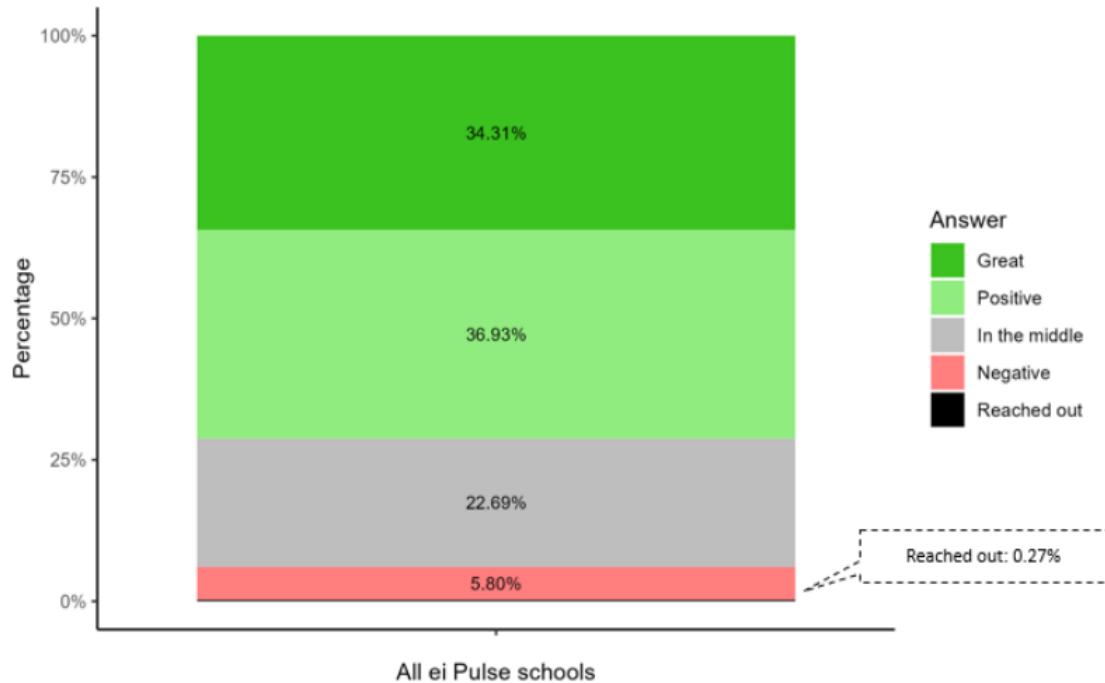
We support the inclusion of wellbeing targets incorporated into the next NSRA, and point to eiPulse as an established, evidence-based approach to collecting data that has already been implemented across over 120 schools nationally, with approximately 100,000 students. eiPulse is a real-time wellbeing tool that provides a weekly check-in with students and gives options for asking for help when students need it (see Figure 3). This is done via an application on their phone or device, and takes about 1 minute. In addition to providing valuable information for teachers, and providing safe, convenient opportunities for students to reflect on their wellbeing and reach out if needed, the data can be collated at a national level. For example, the most recent Data Insights report collated wellbeing data on all eiPulse participants nationally (see Figure 4).

*Figure 3: eiPulse app as seen from a user perspective. Image sourced from Data Insights report.*



Figure 4: Wellbeing data collated from eiPulse. Image sourced from Data Insights report.

The Big Question (how students were feeling) across all schools (Mar 2021 - Aug 2022)



Students also respond positively to eiPulse, with the following comments made:

*"One thing that has been really important to me is the one minute... the time I get to really think about how I really feel." (Senior Student, South Australia, 2020)*

*"Pulse is an easy and quick way to get the teacher's attention – if you need help or someone to talk to." (Senior Student, Victoria, 2022)*

*"Every Tuesday we all do a pulse check on how we feel, it is a safe and easy way to connect with our teachers, and just part of what we do at [name of school]." (Senior Student, Victoria, 2022)*

11. *Would there be benefit in surveying students to help understand student perceptions of safety and belonging at school, subjective state of wellbeing, school climate and classroom disruption? Would there be value in incorporating this into existing National Assessment Program surveys such as NAPLAN?*

We agree that there is benefit in surveying children and young people about their experiences, and support the incorporation of this data collection into existing national assessment programs.



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