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REVIEW TO INFORM A BETTER  
AND FAIRER EDUCATION  
SYSTEM

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ORYGEN SUBMISSION

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## REVIEW TO INFORM A BETTER AND FAIRER EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### ORYGEN SUBMISSION

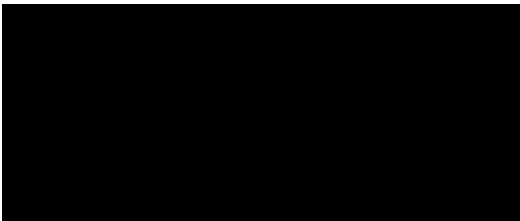
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Orygen welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System and help shape the next iteration of the National School Reform Agreement. Orygen's submission will address how the next NSRA can contribute to improving student mental health and wellbeing, and how targeted and evidence-based support programs and services can drive real improvements in student outcomes – particularly those students most at risk of falling behind.

### 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.



### SNAPSHOT: OVERVIEW OF CURRENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING TRENDS IN YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

Young people's mental health and wellbeing has been in decline for more than ten years. HILDA Survey data shows that while levels were relatively stable from 2001–2010, they have been deteriorating since 2011 – particularly in young women and adolescent girls.(1) Likewise, data collected through Mission Australia's Youth Surveys show the prevalence of psychological distress in young people has increased from 18.6 per cent in 2012 to 26.6 per cent in 2020.(2) By 2022 – two years into the COVID-19 pandemic – psychological distress prevalence had risen to 28.8 per cent, nearly one in three young people.(3)

The number of young people presenting to emergency departments for treatment of intentional self-harm or suicide ideation has also increased significantly in recent years.(4-6) Registers in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland have all reported increased suicide rates in 2022 (statistics for other states and territories have not yet been published).(4)

Government education strategies need to recognise the importance of supporting the mental health and wellbeing of young people. Fifty percent of lifetime mental health challenges begin before the age of 15 (75 per cent before the age of 24) and evidence suggests many people who experience mental ill-health during childhood continue to face difficulties into adulthood.(7, 8)

Education and employment are significant protective factors for a wide range of health and wellbeing outcomes, including income and life satisfaction. Conversely, disengagement from these activities has a negative impact on these outcomes. It is crucial that evidence-based mental health and wellbeing programs and services are available in schools to ensure young people are supported to achieve their full social and economic potential.(9)

## IMPROVING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

### 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?

Schools are ideally placed to coordinate an array of supports designed to fulfill a wider social obligation to protect and support children and young people. Where a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively, the development social and emotional skills and resilience is viewed as essential element of student education and preparation for adulthood. In this environment:

- students feel confident they can seek support from school staff;
- teachers are equipped to reach out to and guide students they are concerned about; and
- school staff can confidently refer students to professional support services and psychological care might even be available on-site.

#### Example: The Children and Young People's Mental Health Trailblazer program (UK)

**The Trailblazer program from the UK provides a further option for supporting students' mental health. Launched in 2018, the Children and Young People's Mental Health Trailblazer program involved the development of an education mental health practitioner workforce and the embedding of mental health support teams in schools. Early evaluation of the program has found school staff felt more confident in supporting student mental health.(10)**

With sufficient training and guidance, school staff can successfully and confidently deliver universal wellbeing education programs and coordinate formal mental health care for those students who require increased levels of support. However, they should not be required to exceed the scope of their role to cover workforce gaps in other sectors. Dedicated and ongoing collaboration between different levels of government, departments and relevant sector representatives can enable and support schools to identify and establish the required links to community-based services which can facilitate strong universal mental health and wellbeing foundations.(11-14) These links also enable schools to tap into these established relationships when they require extra support to manage unexpected or difficult challenges.(12)

Recognising the importance of cross-sector and department collaboration, the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System recommended the Victorian Government develop a fund to assist schools to select the most appropriate wellbeing support for their students.(11) Victoria's *Schools Mental Health Reform Reference Group* was a key contributor to the resultant *Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu* which provides a suite of validated, evidence-based programs and initiatives ('the Menu').(15) Additional tools and guides available to school staff, ensure students' voices are heard throughout planning processes to encourage a whole-of-school approach.(16) The programs and resources available through the Menu are designed to assist schools to provide different levels of mental health and wellbeing support, depending on the needs of their students. This tiered approach means schools can promote universal positive mental health (Tier 1), while also accessing early

intervention and cohort specific support (Tier 2) or targeted support (Tier 3) for those students with more complex needs.(15) Although the Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu is still in its early stages of release, it offers a model that may be suitable to roll-out nationally.

### Recommendations

**Review the Victorian Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu model to better understand its strengths and weaknesses in supporting schools to access evidence-based mental health and wellbeing resources suitable for the needs of their students. Consider the suitability of the Menu for national implementation.**

**Investigate the establishment of a National Schools Mental Health Reform Reference Group to inform national school mental health and wellbeing policy and strategies within the NSRA.**

**Adequately resource strong referral pathways to ensure professional mental health and psychosocial supports are accessible to students who require more intensive support.**

## WHAT EVIDENCE-BASED WELLBEING APPROACHES CURRENTLY BEING IMPLEMENTED BY SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES SHOULD BE CONSIDERED AS PART OF A NATIONAL REFORM AGENDA?

Orygen has produced a number of resources which are based on evidence to assist people working to support young people's mental health and wellbeing in schools. These resources may be useful additional reading for this Review's Expert Panel and for those involved in the development and implementation of the next National School Reform Agreement and its subsequent policies, programs, and initiatives.

The resources include:

- [A review of secondary school-based mental health prevention programs](#) (17)
- [Implementing school-based mental health prevention programs toolkit](#) (18)
- [Including student voice in school-based mental health programs toolkit](#) (19)

### Suicide prevention programs in school

The most recent National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing found younger adults (aged 16–34) have far higher rates of self-harm (18.2 per cent) and suicidal behaviours (5.2 per cent) than the general population.(20) This highlights the need to incorporate suicide prevention and responses to self-harm within the broader education responses to student mental health.

Evidence-based programs such as safeTALK have been shown to be safely delivered with young people aged 15 and over and increased participant's knowledge about suicide, confidence in discussing suicide related issues, and willingness to seek help for suicidal thoughts.(21)

While stand-alone programs can have utility, multi-level interventions could provide better outcomes.(22) Orygen has incorporated safeTALK into a Multimodal Approach to Preventing Suicide in Schools (MAPSS) project responds to these rising rates of suicide.(23)

The MAPSS project 'aims to reduce suicide risk and increase help-seeking among young people via an integrated program delivered to year 10 students in schools across north-west Melbourne'. It involves three suicide prevention approaches:

- safeTALK educational workshops, delivered by Lifeline Australia facilitators,
- screening to identify students at risk of suicide, and
- online cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).(24)

MAPSS is currently undergoing evaluation and researchers hypothesise the program will 'reduce suicide risk, improve risk recognition, increase health service use among participants' – that is, the

students taking part in the project.(23) Should this hypothesis be proven, MAPSS may be suitable for implementation by other schools and communities across Australia.

### **Digital resources for suicide prevention**

Although young people often seek professional healthcare support (for example, GPs and psychologists) for their mental health, they also frequently turn to non-professional support networks, such as friends, family, schools, and online connections. A recent study found young people also spend an average of 3.5 hours supporting friends each week.(25)

Today's students exist in both online and offline environments. They seek mental health and wellbeing support for themselves online, and they also turn to digital resources to learn more about the issues their friends or peers are experiencing. Although the value of online resources and platforms for improving mental health and wellbeing is often polarising even among young people, it is important we acknowledge that many *do* find them helpful.(25)

Orygen's [#chatsafe](#) platform is an online suicide prevention tool and includes a set of evidence-informed guidelines to assist young people to communicate safely online about suicide.(26) Designed by young people, suicide prevention experts, and media and communications professionals, #chatspace provides users with information, tips and advice for talking about and responding to suicide and suicide ideation online.(27) The [#chatsafe for educators resource](#) has also been designed to help educators better equip the young people they have contact with to talk safely on social media about suicide. Promoting the #chatsafe platform through schools (where age appropriate) may also assist in raising young people's awareness of how to communicate safely within their online and offline peer networks and encourage help-seeking behaviours.

### **Recommendation**

**Multi-tiered/multi-modal approaches to suicide prevention in education settings show promise and are more likely to be effective than single stand-alone interventions. Further research and evaluation should be funded to build the evidence-base.**

**Include evidence-based online suicide prevention resources that have been co-designed with young people, such as #chatsafe for educators, as part of school mental health resources. Regularly review and update tools to ensure they are fit for purpose and continue to reflect the latest available evidence.**

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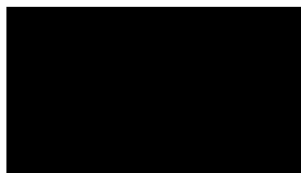
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**Orygen acknowledges** the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

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