



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Submitting as a: Parent or community organisation
State: Vic.

Summary

The Alannah & Madeline Foundation was set up in memory of Alannah and Madeline Mikac, tragically killed with their mother and 32 others at Port Arthur in 1996. We care for children who have experienced or witnessed serious violence; reduce the incidence of bullying, cyber bullying and other cyber risks; and, advocate for the safety and wellbeing of children.

Our strong conviction is that all students have the right to learn in respectful, supportive and caring school communities. We also recognise that children today are digital learners and live their lives both on and offline. Schools need to adapt to the changed circumstances of how children learn through digital engagement.

Universal access to a whole school approach to student wellbeing – focusing on what matters most and those who need it most

Main submission

The Foundation is concerned at the impact of social exclusion, violence and trauma on children's capacity to learn and achieve. We know that certain groups of young people experience higher rates of assault, harassment, aggression and bullying, particularly LGBTIQ, Indigenous young people, those from minority groups, who are on the autism spectrum or have experienced trauma. Children from these groups are most vulnerable to hostile behaviours and can consequently experience emotional, psychological, and somatic harm as well as lower academic achievement.

Rates of mental illness are rising among young people. Mission Australia's latest Youth Survey showed that one in four young people is at risk of serious mental illness, an increase from 22 percent in 2012 to 28.6 percent in 2016 in young females (compared to 12.7 percent to 14.1 percent for males). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), depression is now the leading cause of ill health and disability, having risen by more than 18 percent worldwide since 2005.

There must be a commitment to school wellbeing, aimed at fostering inclusion, enhancing respectful relationships, protecting and supporting children experiencing family and social violence and reducing bullying and other harmful behaviours.

‘Student wellbeing is defined as ‘a sustainable state of positive mood and attitude, resilience and satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences at school’.

Enhancement of student wellbeing is an important component in the development of students’ social, emotional and academic competence and a significant contribution to preventing youth depression, suicide, self-harm, antisocial behaviour (including violence and bullying) and substance abuse.

Student wellbeing is ‘pervasive’ in that it affects most aspects of a student’s functioning at school and in other aspects of life; it is indicated by the degree to which a student demonstrates effective academic, social, and emotional functioning and appropriate behaviour at school.

Enhanced wellbeing affects student outcomes:

- Higher academic achievement and completion of Year 12;
- Better mental health (i.e. lower and/or less severe rates of illnesses such as depression and anxiety);
- A more pro-social, responsible and lawful lifestyle (i.e. concern for the wellbeing of others, making responsible decisions about the consequences of their actions on themselves and others (including using drugs and alcohol in a responsible way), and not violating laws and norms of their society.

The four main mechanisms by which the enhancement of student wellbeing and its pathways can indirectly improve academic achievement are:

- Increasing student motivation to participate and achieve
- Increasing student engagement with, and participation in learning
- Increasing student attendance and hence increasing school completion
- Decreasing problem behaviour at school and hence decreasing levels of suspension and exclusion.

An emphasis on building wellbeing includes positive teacher-student relationships associated with increased behavioural, cognitive and emotional engagement of students, together with positive peer relationships that foster connectedness to school and psychosocial wellbeing. Wellbeing encourages the growth of resilience, which helps young people cope with stressful life events.

The following principles contribute to good practice:

- Universal programs are better – i.e. delivered to all students rather than being specifically targeted towards ‘at risk’ students

- School-wide programs are more effective when embedded in the curriculum and life of the school
- Focus on multiple domains – that is, forging partnerships between school, family and community
- Multi-strategic approaches using a variety of strategies and sequences that promote social skills and prosocial behaviour
- Development of prosocial attitudes/values and teaching of social skills
- Delivered to children early in their schooling
- Sustained
- Teachers’ behaviour consistent with what they are teaching.

These principles underpin eSmart Schools, a whole-of-organisation behavioural improvement model developed by the Alannah & Madeline Foundation, of which wellbeing is the core tenet. It operates through six domains of activity through which schools progress at their own pace and with recognition of work undertaken in any or all of: Organisational Structures and Features, Policies and Practices, School Culture, Curriculum, Pedagogy and Parent Involvement. It is now in 2500 schools across the country and has been externally evaluated. It is a best practice framework to guide and support schools to enhance wellbeing and improve school culture.

Emphasis on Early Childhood

Research suggests spending on early childhood is one of the keys to later educational success.

Learners in the lowest socio-economic quintile are 2.08 times more likely to miss out than learners in the highest socio-economic quintile (31.7 percent vs. 15.2 percent) and continue to miss out on the social and academic skills needed for later success throughout their educational and employment life, and ‘disproportionately likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds’. Engagement, wellbeing and non-cognitive skills are important elements of development across the early years – and continue to be so across the learning span.

A focus on development of literacies (critical, digital) from the earliest years to prepare students for participation in a globalised world

‘Digital literacy’ is an increasingly important subset of broader literacy practices. Digital literacies involve mastering ideas, not keystrokes. It enables students to ‘decipher complex images and sounds as well as the syntactical subtleties of words’.

‘Digital literacies’ can be defined as a set of social practices involving ‘reading, writing and multimodal meaning-making through the use of a range of digital technologies’. It describes literacy events and practices that involve digital

technologies, but may also involve non-digital practices. Ability to understand, use, analyse and critically evaluate information in multiple formats from a wide range of [digital] sources will take diverse forms. Like other forms of communication, these should be underpinned by explicit teaching about ethical values and behaviour.

Critical and creative thinking, specifically addressed by the Australian Curriculum, is envisioned as a primary purpose of education: to 'challenge [students] to think logically, reason, be open-minded, seek alternatives, tolerate ambiguity, inquire into possibilities, be innovative risk-takers, and use their imagination.

An investment in quality – and caring – teaching

Student uptake of critical/digital literacies must be supported by adequate preparation of teachers to enable them to embed technology in all its guises into the curriculum – an integrated tool for learning rather than an add-on or distraction. Ongoing professional learning is also vital as obsolescence arrives fast and keeping up-to-date with new technologies, programs, apps, risks and opportunities is imperative. Use of the technology framework of TPACK (interaction of the domains of Technology, Content and Pedagogical Knowledge) or SAMR (Substitution Augmentation Modification Redefinition) or the framework of High Possibility Classrooms can enhance learning using technology in high schools, through 'theory, creativity, public learning, life preparation, and contextual accommodations'.

A vital aspect of quality teaching lies in strong, respectful, genuine relationships between teachers and students – part of a broader wellbeing agenda demonstrating that social and emotional learning can help to erase differences in engagement, attachment to school, completion of Year 12 and successful transition to further learning or employment. This has consequences for teacher training to ensure underpinning knowledge, behavioural understandings and protocols.

Professor John Hattie has shown that teaching which involves 'goal-oriented, specific feedback to students, and positive teacher-student interaction, (our emphasis) have the most impact on learning growth. A meta-analysis of available research shows that students do substantially better at school when you show them empathy and warmth. According to Hattie, the three keys to caring relationships are warmth, empathy and time.

Many who leave school early do so because of their negative experiences at school, experiences linked to poor relations with their teachers and peers. 'Many young people who label themselves as 'not good at school' would do better to understand as "not good at doing school as defined by the school itself" particularly with its emphasis in the senior years on a competitive academic curriculum'.

Children need knowledge to thrive in a globalised, interconnected world. This requires creativity, flexibility, problem solving skills, collaboration and ownership over students' own learning. The current education system, whose model dates back

to the industrial age, is ill-prepared to educate and ready the next generation of creative leaders.

Funding for the future

If we are to have an equitable education system we must have a needs-based funding model for all Australian schools and take into account the changing nature of work and of society.

Australia has a highly segregated schooling system and OECD data provide a strong correlation between high-performing systems such as Singapore and factors of social cohesion and equity. In Australia, this difference in educational attainment is a result due at least in part to differences in resources and opportunities.

The Finnish education system's success provides an excellent exemplar for changes to the Australian educational landscape: in the early years, promotion of every child's health and wellbeing, growth of good social habits, skills of friendship and respect for others and language enrichment and communication. 'Core competences include "learning-to learn", multiliteracy, digital skills and entrepreneurship'.

In Australia, a learning gap grows much larger after Year 3. Disadvantaged students fall further behind each year they are at school. This gap, depicted as 'alarming', between students whose parents have low education and those with highly educated parents grows from 10 months in Year 3 to around two-and-a-half years by Year 9. High achieving students in disadvantaged schools show the biggest learning gap with these students in disadvantaged schools making less progress than low achievers in high-advantage schools over the six years. In the Middle Years, 28.4 percent of Australian learners have not developed the core skills required to access educational opportunity in the middle years (Year 7 NAPLAN Reading).

While the proposed funding model recognises and tackles the particular needs of the Northern Territory, it leaves pockets of disadvantage and unemployment unaddressed. A key issue to be addressed is one of educational inequality across Australia and it is in the government's interest to address educational inequalities.

A strong link exists between educational attainment and lower crime rates. A US report published in 2013 posited that the nation could save up to \$18.5 billion if the high school male graduation rate increased by only 5 percentage points. 'There is an indirect correlation between educational attainment and arrest and incarceration rates, particularly among males ... According to the most recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Justice, 56 percent of federal inmates, 67 percent of inmates in state prisons, and 69 percent of inmates in local jails did not complete high school. Additionally, the number of incarcerated individuals without a high school diploma is increasing over time'.

We must provide adequate additional support for students whose achievement falls behind – and usually further behind with each year of school. The majority of youths facing court have experienced school suspension, exclusion and dropout. Protective factors that can be provided by schools include reading remediation. Failure to provide learning and social support, particularly in the early years accrues far greater costs in terms of crime, policing and incarceration later in the lifespan.

The focus of spending would be on ‘reforming school climates to keep students engaged in ways that will lead them toward college and a career away from crime and prison’ – what we would see as an approach centred on wellbeing and social and emotional learning as well as curriculum reform.

Conclusion

We believe profoundly that student wellbeing must be at the heart of future educative policies and plans. Such an effort would foster inclusion, enhance relationships within a framework of the value of respect, with the additional benefit of acting to protect and support students with disadvantage, marginalisation and other vulnerabilities.

We also support a renewed emphasis on the development of literacies (critical, digital) from the earliest years to prepare students for participation in a globalised world.

Finally and crucially, we endorse a focus on what matters most and those who need it most. We support efforts to increase and improve equality of access to high quality education throughout the schooling span for all learners, with an increased concentration on early years.

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