School survey findings on student wellbeing

October 2020

Introduction

There are a wide range of approaches to support student wellbeing across Western Australian schools.

In September 2019, the Commissioner for Children and Young People invited WA school leaders and wellbeing staff to participate in a survey on student wellbeing approaches within their school. The Commissioner received 177 responses from the government, Catholic and Independent education sectors.

The responses clearly demonstrated that most schools are dedicated to the wellbeing needs of their students and show determination and agility in the way that they provide support.

Respondents identified a range of wellbeing strategies in place in their schools, and a small number have a clear whole-of-school approach to supporting student wellbeing.

However, the survey responses also highlighted a range of concerns about how schools address student wellbeing.

The nature of the approaches to student wellbeing and the extent to which they addressed the full range of student needs greatly varies. In many cases, school staff identified that while the individual elements of a whole-of-school approach to student wellbeing were in place, including supports for students or social and emotional learning for students, other elements were not present such as a dedicated framework, strategies or proactive planning.

Schools also reported that the majority of approaches to student wellbeing responded to student welfare concerns or acquiring specialised support for at-risk students, rather than a universal approach.

One of the most significant challenges school staff identified was that they did not always feel well equipped to appropriately address student wellbeing needs across the continuum of support required. This was mainly due to lack of capacity within the school as well as challenges accessing and navigating the support from specialised external services.

The learnings from this survey provide a strong foundation to further explore the role of schools in supporting student wellbeing and to help ensure that schools are resourced to strengthen their approaches.

Background

This report is one component of the Commissioner for Children and Young People's Student Wellbeing in Schools project. The project aimed to explore:

- the issues impacting on student's wellbeing
- current policy and approaches that support student wellbeing across Western Australian schools at a systemic and individual level
- examples of best practice
- opportunities to strengthen responses and approaches to ensure that student wellbeing is addressed and students receive the support and assistance they require.

Information for the project was collected directly from the Department of Education, Association of Independent Schools of WA (AISWA) and Catholic Education WA (CEWA), a survey of school staff, individual school case studies and a literature review. The Commissioner's *Supporting student wellbeing in WA schools discussion paper* provides an overview of the information collected.

This report provides a summary of responses from the survey of school staff.

Survey methodology

The school survey was administered online using Survey Monkey, with questions covering:

- the specific issues impacting on students at their school
- what works well within the school to be able to respond to issues at an individual and whole-of-school level
- key achievements and successes in addressing student wellbeing
- gaps and challenges for the school to address student wellbeing needs and access the support required for children and young people.

The survey opened in September 2019 and responses were received in September and October. The opportunity to participate in the survey was promoted to schools by the Department of Education, CEWA, AISWA and the WA Secondary School Executives Association.

Participating schools

The Commissioner received 177 survey responses from primary and secondary schools, Catholic, independent and government schools across the metropolitan and regional areas. A number of other schools also identified as a School of Special Educational Needs, CaRE school, Education Support Centre, Junior Primary School, K–12 school, remote community school, district high school or school with specialist inclusion facilities.

Survey responses were completed by principals, student wellbeing staff members, school psychologists and other staff.

Issues impacting on student wellbeing

Survey respondents identified a range of issues impacting the wellbeing of their students:

- Health and wellbeing
    - mental health, emotional and behavioural disorders
    - disability
    - physical health.
- Parents and family
    - family structures and dynamics
    - parenting styles and capacity
    - child protection concerns.
- Social exclusion and isolation.

Health and wellbeing

Mental health, emotional and behavioural disorders

Overwhelmingly, schools identified mental health, emotional and behavioural disorders as the most common issues impacting student wellbeing. Survey responses highlighted mental health issues from children and young people lacking emotional regulation, resilience and coping skills to more acute issues, such as diagnosed mental health disorders. Responses cited occurrences of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, behavioural disorders such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD), behavioural concerns such physical violence and threatening behaviour, bullying and social isolation, prolonged peer conflict and poor interpersonal skills.

School staff were also concerned about students who demonstrated non-suicidal self-injury, suicidal ideation and high risk or addictive behaviours, as well as students who experienced or were exposed to trauma. This included the mental health of family members, family and domestic violence, intergenerational trauma, sexual abuse, violence in the community, and exposure to traumatic news and events.

"Mental health is becoming a lot more common in our children over the last few years." Regional Catholic primary school

"Mental health issues are a major and increasing concern…self harm is again increasing, along with anxiety." Metropolitan government secondary school

"Increasing incidences of severe mental health conditions in young children – exposure to traumatic situations including domestic violence, inappropriate viewing experiences, lack of security and comfort when needed, exposure to mature/parent conversation and language which is unsuitable for children." Regional primary school

"Mental health concerns impact on an increasing number of our young people. Anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicide ideation and in some cases psychosis are observed in many of our students." Metropolitan independent primary and secondary school

"In addition to their disability, children often suffer with high anxiety affecting their mental health and social/emotional learning." Primary education support centre

"Young people are exhibiting high risk behaviours that expose them to unsafe relationships and abusive behaviours physically, mentally, emotionally…[leading to] long term psychological harm…" Regional government district high school

Disability

A range of diagnosed and imputed disabilities and learning difficulties were identified as impacting student wellbeing, including autism, dyslexia, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), developmental language disorders, physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy, hearing, sight and mobility issues, and intellectual disability. School responses indicated that a lack of adequate and accessible services and supports presented a major barrier in supporting the wellbeing of students with disability.

"Increasing incidences of undiagnosable or comorbid disabilities which may be attributed to Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder…" Regional primary school

"Approx. 27% of our students are on the NCDD (Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on school students with disability) register. Many have social/emotional needs and learning needs." Regional independent primary school

"Difficulty arises when there may be other emotional and social issues these students display along with their disability…..When looking at enrolment forms it appears more students have a [disability] *diagnosis prior to starting at high school or some learning problems are not identified earlier in primary school."* Metropolitan Catholic secondary school

Physical health

Many schools identified poor physical health as a cause of reduced wellbeing outcomes for students. The reasons for poor physical health ranged from incurable diseases and temporary conditions to physical health problems associated with the home environment and poverty.

Factors impacting on physical health included inadequate housing, poor nutrition and low hygiene, which are exacerbated for families living in remote locations and children in out-of-home care. Survey responses also identified a range of lifestyle factors impacting on physical health, such as poor food choices, lack of physical exercise, lack of sleep, unlimited use of screen time, inactivity, social disconnection, and unmanaged health needs.

"…family homelessness, lack of food, nowhere to wash." Primary school

"Physical health needs, poor nutrition, iron deficiency and vitamin D deficiency is often diagnosed, no lunches or breakfast daily provided." Metropolitan independent secondary school

"Otitis media, conductive hearing loss, trachoma, skin sores, head lice." Regional primary school

"Children are increasingly sedentary due to screen-time (gaming, YouTube, TV) and in extreme cases, this is completely uncontrolled by parents." Regional primary school

Parents and families

Family structures and dynamics

Problems within the family unit were frequently identified as impacting on student wellbeing and achievement. The broad range of family and parenting issues spanned from challenges within family structures and dynamics, parental capacity and parenting practices to extreme financial hardship, parental mental health problems, welfare issues and child protection concerns.

Student attendance and engagement was also impacted by family transiency, caregiver health issues, legal problems, lack of transport, and feeling unsafe or disconnected from school.

> "…families being unable to meet basic needs, overcrowding in homes, utilities being restricted for months." Regional school

> "The main issue impacting on our students and families is poverty. We see the signs of this on a daily basis; family and domestic violence, parental alcohol and other drug dependency, child protection concerns, mental health issues such as low self-esteem, anxiety, self-harm and suicide ideation." Metropolitan government primary school

> "Increased family issues and the impact on students – e.g. family separation, violence, drugs." Metropolitan Catholic secondary school

> "FIFO family structure and the associated challenges, split families that result in students residing across two homes, number of grandparents are the main carers – limited support for the grandparents in raising their grandchildren." Metropolitan government primary school

Parenting styles and capacity

Schools identified that some parenting practices also impacted on student wellbeing, through a lack of positive discipline practices, lack of boundaries, and limited role modelling for children. This also extended to the parent's relationships with schools and lack of willingness to take responsibility for their child's behaviour.

> "Number of parents who lack parenting skills and their efforts actually hinder their child's development." Metropolitan Catholic primary school

> "Lack of boundaries being set by caring adults; ie poor parenting." Metropolitan Catholic CaRE school

> "…lack of modelling at home of how to cope with disappointment…" Primary school

> "Overprotective parents/carers contributing to lack of resilience, limiting a 'have-a-go' attitude." Metropolitan government primary school

> "Culture of blame whereby parents are combative with the school." Regional primary school

A few schools identified other problems experienced by students at home including caregivers who were in hospital or incapacitated at home with serious health concerns,

children being raised by grandparents, those who were incarcerated or involved in criminal activity, and caregivers who showed little interest in their children's education.

Child protection concerns

Many school responses emphasised the prevalence of child protection concerns for students, including exposure to family and domestic violence, substance use at home and children being in out-of-home care. Some schools were concerned that the number of families with child protection concerns was growing.

"Family violence in the home, increased amount of trauma experienced by our students, drug and alcohol abuse in the family home." Metropolitan government primary school

"Many kids not safe and supported due to family substance misuse, family long-term unemployment, leading to neglect, (sometime leading to kids in care)." Metropolitan Catholic CaRE school

"The full impact of social/emotional problems that arise from poverty, disengaged/dysfunctional homes, drug and alcohol impacts, child abuse, homelessness, etc." Regional secondary school

"[Students] *do not experience physical and emotional safety in the home and their community."* Metropolitan government primary school

"Child protection concerns - local context with sexual abuse, drugs, domestic abuse, mental health challenges, low school attendance, transiency, [and] *parenting."* Regional primary school with specialist inclusion facilities

Social isolation and exclusion

A number of student cohorts were identified as experiencing social isolation, exclusion or feelings of not belonging. This often occurred as a result of racism or a lack of understanding and respect for difference, including for varied abilities, diverse cultural background or diverse sexuality or gender identity.

Social isolation was also identified for students in regional areas who had limited opportunities for social connection outside of school, and for students whose behaviours impacted on their ability to connect with their peers.

"Isolation through EALD (English as an Additional Language or Dialect) and fitting into the community." Metropolitan government primary school

"[An issue impacting students is] *peer group pressure and acceptance of difference."* Metropolitan government primary school

"[Students living outside of our regional town] *do not connect well with outside avenues (sporting and cultural) which gives them limited scope for the important skills of social interaction."* Primary school

"[Students with a disability can experience] *bullying and exclusion from mainstream peers."* Regional education support centre

"Their own physical or mental health issues leave them unconnected especially from peers…We find that it is mostly these issues…that lead to poor social skills, poor reading of social cues, and hence relational conflict and bullying issues." Metropolitan Catholic CaRE school

What is working well to support student wellbeing?

Leadership, strategy and planning

School responses commonly identified that students were best supported in safe, inclusive, and enjoyable school environments where they felt accepted. There was recognition that individual students who cultivated strong, positive relationships at school were better equipped to deal with the challenges that they may be experiencing.

"We take an individualised approach to meet educational, social and emotional needs of students." Regional primary school

"A committed and professional staff that go the extra mile to provide a supportive and inclusive school and classroom environment. Investing the time in building relationships - getting to know each child as an individual and what their strengths and weaknesses are." Metropolitan Catholic primary school

"The school's pastoral care policy focuses on building positive relationships ensuring a positive learning environment where children are engaged and set up for success." Regional primary school

The way that schools implemented student wellbeing approaches varied, however staff recognised that having a clear approach and initiatives embedded in curriculum, culture and everyday habits were particularly effective in improving wellbeing for all members of the school community. This included having school leadership demonstrate a clear commitment to wellbeing and prioritising this in school planning, policies and frameworks. Having strategies that create a positive and inclusive school culture and where school members modelled respectful and positive relationships were also considered effective.

"The whole school approach not only to learning but also developing social skills, resilience and emotional regulation has improved the chances of success for our students." Regional government primary school

"A whole school approach to Social /Emotional wellbeing, supported by School Social worker, School Psychologist, and implementation of the Child Safe framework have provided a sound basis on which to manage all related issues." Metropolitan Catholic school

"We have a deliberate and explicit Health and Wellbeing initiative for our students with a variety of strategies and activities to address many of the concerns we have experienced." Metropolitan government secondary school

'[What's working well is] *having defined processes for staff to follow if they have a concern about a child."* Metropolitan primary school

"Whole Centre approaches and programs – innovative/dedicated staff, positive behaviour support culture – creating indoor/outdoor sensory areas, expanding social and emotional regulation capacity, inclusive performance." Education support centre

"On a whole school level, we have developed pastoral curriculum initiatives that target problem behaviour and held parent education evenings on adolescent behaviour." Metropolitan independent secondary school

Survey responses referenced the following strategies to address student wellbeing:

- wellbeing policies and strategies
- dedicated wellbeing staff to coordinate school approaches, including wellbeing committees, action teams, and mental health coordinators as part of the Mental Health in Schools initiative
- student support models, including coordinated student services teams and the use of pastoral care models
- dedicated intervention strategies for students at risk, including screening, case management systems and intervention programs use of alternative curriculum for students to support engagement.

A number of dedicated frameworks and approaches that support positive student wellbeing and engagement at school were also identified. These included positive behaviour support and learning approaches (e.g. Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement (PERMA)), Zones of Regulation program, Be You Framework, Child Safe Framework, National Safe Schools Framework, Classroom Management Strategies (CMS), Collaborative Proactive Solutions, trauma-informed practice models, anti-bullying frameworks, Aussie Optimism program, and applied behaviour analysis, augmented and alternative communication approaches.

Support for students

Creating a school environment that is safe, inclusive and welcoming was commonly identified by school staff as fundamental to supporting individual student wellbeing.

"Breakfast Club is heavily relied upon by our families, with breakfast and lunch supplied on a daily basis. Teachers work very hard to provide a safe, nurturing environment and appropriate curriculum for all of our students." Regional primary school

"Before students can be… ready for learning, they need to be clothed, fed and valued by those around them." Metropolitan Catholic secondary school

"School is a safe haven for many students, children are fed and clothed at school, social/emotional programs are in place at school." Regional Catholic primary and secondary school)

"During lunchtimes children can spend time in the "Haven Room" a multi-sensory environment that is designed to ensure that children can enjoy a safe space and be mentored by the teacher who is present in the room each day. We constantly strive for improvement to cater for the needs of our students." Regional primary school

Dedicated support people and a coordinated pastoral care approach enabled schools to concentrate on understanding the needs of each student and respond accordingly. This included support through Student Services Teams, Year Coordinators and other important roles such as school psychologists or counsellors, chaplains, school nurses, youth workers, social workers, as well as student peer support programs.

"Having one person coordinating means nothing gets missed and all funding, support provisions, parent contact, allied health correspondence, etc. is consistent through one person." Regional independent primary school

"Investment in our services team of a social worker, school psychologist and a chaplain, all communication with my Deputy Principal to plan and cross reference the students who are engaging in the services has resulted in better coverage, a more consistent approach and a more thorough coverage for students." Metropolitan independent government school

"Excellent work undertaken by the College's counselling team. Supportive Year Coordinators… help students navigate social issues etc." Metropolitan Catholic secondary school

"We also use check-ins on a daily basis where students check in to share how they are feeling and why. This has helped immensely to manage student behaviour on a daily basis. Staff are able to see straight away if a student is feeling upset, worried, stressed, anxious etc. and we can help." Regional government primary and secondary school

"Dedicated student support structures within the school to ensure that students are looked after. Making use of community programs for students most at risk." Metropolitan secondary school

"The ability to determine our own staffing profile around psychs, Chaplains, AIEO's & Social Workers has been very effective for us." Metropolitan primary school

Some respondents mentioned both internal and external supports to bolster the wellbeing and engagement of specific vulnerable cohorts of students, including students who are Aboriginal, with disability or special educational needs or with other complex needs.

"We have a new program we are trialing called TEP - 2 that works with a care school to integrate school, counselling and other support for students. This has shown some early success." Metropolitan secondary school

"…monitoring attendance of children of concern; feeding them while at school and, in the case of one family, providing food parcels for home; driving the bus around each morning to pick up ATSI children to improve attendance and punctuality has improved the attendance of our youngest children the impact of which is higher engagement in school, improved school readiness and developing socialisation skills." Regional Catholic primary school

"Developing a Student Services Team that adopts the philosophies behind Positive Education has allowed us to identify and support many Tier 2/3 students requiring additional strategies beyond the classroom….students requiring special care may

accesses our team which includes a School Psychologist, Chaplain, Emotional and Social Well Being Teacher." Metropolitan primary school

"Building rapport, demonstrating advocacy, spending time with the student, communicating process, letting the student be a co-architect of the solution, parent engagement." Metropolitan independent secondary school

"We work closely with SSENBE (School of Specialist Educational Needs Behaviour and Engagement) and SSEND (Disability) teams to help us with introducing changes into classrooms to support our students with disabilities or mental health issues." Regional government primary and secondary school

"Targeted intervention is in place for students with specific needs." Regional primary school

Two Catholic schools reported progressing student wellbeing through their religious teachings, including religious education and the Making Jesus Real whole-of-school approach.

Social and emotional learning for students

Several responses recognised the benefit of explicitly teaching social and emotional learning to students, both as part of a whole-school approach, as well as targeting students with mental health, emotional and behavioural disorders.

"…developing social skills, resilience and emotional regulation has improved the chances of success for our students. Although not generally considered high performers academically all of our students are working hard to achieve their personal best in everything they do." Regional government primary school

"We have wellbeing lessons for each class each week run by a newly appointed wellbeing coordinator." Metropolitan Catholic primary school

"We have a plethora of programs that we run at our school… they bond and develop relationships with each other, giving them someone else to talk to outside of their core group of friends. We also have wellbeing sessions for our upper-school students to help with anxiety and stress of the workload." Remote government secondary school

Specific social emotional learning programs being provided included Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PAThS), Aussie Optimism, Friendly Schools, Drumbeat, You Can Do It, Protective Behaviours, Keeping it Safe child protection framework and Teen Mental Health First Aid.

Student participation

A few schools identified avenues for students to participate in decision making within the school or opportunities to have their voice heard, including through student leadership roles or other initiatives.

"We also have a high level of student voice through "Parliament." Regional Independent primary school

"We have completed a wellbeing survey with the students and have just participated in the South Australian wellbeing survey." Metropolitan primary school

"Student wellbeing was surveyed at the beginning of the year and most students responded very negatively to their social and emotional state. The school has put in place strategic targets for improvement and we are working with staff and other agencies to improve the outcomes for students." Metropolitan government primary school

Student participation and engagement was seen by many schools to be enhanced when teachers created safe, engaging and fun learning environments.

"We try to provide a safe and nurturing environment and so students are happy to be at school." Metropolitan Catholic secondary school

"Improving engagement and connection at school with having a homework club, robotics and dance clubs and a school garden has seen parents and students want to attend more." Metropolitan primary school

Partnerships

Partnerships with parents

Schools highlighted the importance of creating positive working relationships with parents to support student wellbeing. Some schools offered parenting programs to families, while others employed links with their external networks to provide support for parents and families.

"The families are constantly engaging in conversations around positive school attendance, getting into routines and being held accountable for following through and problem solving with support." Metropolitan primary school

"Strong relationships with parents and carers who are open to listening and working with us to assist children." Regional primary school

"I conduct home visits to follow up lack of engagement from families and carers. This is showing that we care enough to follow up and has opened up lines of communication." Metropolitan independent primary school

"We have a counsellor on our staff and meet regularly with any parents experiencing social/financial/emotional hardships." Regional Catholic primary school

"Establishing a non-judgemental approach with families and carers - working together to help the young person engage in school…..closing the gaps and loopholes between school and parents/carers so that students are getting the same messages." Metropolitan Catholic CaRE school

"Relationship building is fundamental and is supported by our Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers, school Chaplain, KindiLink, Community participation and partnerships." Regional primary school

Partnerships with community

> *"Engaging with community support agencies, bringing them into school to help our families to build relationships and feel comfortable about engaging with these services has been productive."* Metropolitan government primary school

School engagement with other agencies and community services varied greatly depending on the availability and capacity of services within the local area. Schools engaged with a number of different agencies to support student wellbeing or respond to concerns, including:

- Department for Communities for referring child protection concerns and supporting and planning for students in care
- health providers such as general practitioners, Allied Health practitioners, onsite School Nurse, Royal Flying Doctor Service, Aboriginal health providers
- mental health service providers such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, onsite school nurses, psychiatrists and psychologists, School of Special Educational Needs: Medical and Mental, Smiling Minds, headspace
- disability service providers such as School of Special Education Needs – Disability and Sensory, Senses and other disability support agencies
- welfare, crisis and material basic support such as Centrelink visits to the school, Foodbank, Smith Family scholarships, community agency support
- sporting and recreation groups such as Clontarf Academy, local sporting organisations, Rotary Clubs and Police, Citizens Youth Centres
- community groups such as Wirrpanda Foundation and migrant centres
- justice services such as police, youth justice services and legal support services
- other education services such as KindiLink, Early Learning Centres.

Some school staff also commented on engaging with the wider community and general public to support student engagement and wellbeing.

> *"Our whole school and community Choose Respect Initiative has had a significant impact upon students and parents/carers adopting a more pro-active approach to dealing with conflict."* Regional government school

> *"Community Education Agreement - shared direction, expectations and operation of the school."* Remote community school

> "[The student] *norm is disengagement, so it's trying to break that mould, meet system requirements, listen to community priorities and please everyone and often feeling like you are doing it alone."* Regional district high school

> *"Having an early learning centre situated in the local community has built positive relationships with parents before their children begin compulsory schooling."* Regional government primary school

Professional learning and development for educators

Ongoing and targeted professional learning was another strategy used to build staff capacity and the wellbeing of the whole school community.

Professional learning opportunities identified in the survey mostly centered around mental health issues. These included training on Teen Mental Health First Aid for Adults, Gatekeeper Suicide Prevention, and Be You Mental Health in Schools. Team Teach, Classroom Management Strategies, Positive Behaviour Support and trauma-informed training were also identified as opportunities that supported teachers to work with students with social and emotional issues.

Some survey responses described success in staff capacity building using staff mentoring, classroom observations and sharing of ideas about individual students in professional learning communities.

What are the barriers to supporting student wellbeing?

The school staff participating in the survey identified a range of challenges that impacted on their ability to adequately and effectively address student wellbeing.

Access to support services

Many responses highlighted the challenge of not being able to access appropriate support agencies to address specific wellbeing needs of students. This included issues relating to staff turnover within organisations; challenges with collaboration, communication and information sharing between agencies; a lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities to address student wellbeing needs between agencies and schools; limited availability and capacity of services; and issues accessing services within regional and remote communities.

> *"Having access to professionals and agencies that can assist on a regular basis is a challenge. Most of the time, these agencies are located in another country town and professionals only visit once a week or twice a month."* Regional primary school

> *"Interagency engagement is haphazard with many looking to abrogate responsibility as the "lead" agency onto education."* Metropolitan secondary school

> *"Sometimes it's not knowing where to go to get particular support for students."* Metropolitan independent primary school

> *"Government agencies reluctance to take on issues within our school due to perceived low severity level and socio-economic status."* Catholic secondary school

> *"Often the school acts as the 'case manager' and tries to bring agencies together but this is a very time consuming process and not really in our brief."* Regional primary and secondary school

> *"Distance and having someone to travel the distance. We have just received a chaplain with is great but he travels 200km to get to our school."* Regional primary school

> *"Lack of communication from outside agencies."* Primary school

Child protection concerns

Survey respondents also discussed the challenges in getting support to address child protection concerns, including a lack of follow up when schools have raised concerns, and limited capacity and resourcing of child protection services.

"Welfare dumps these kids in school with no wrap-around support, no attempt to assist teachers and support staff manage very challenging behaviours, and no strategy to advance the life-chances for these young people." Regional secondary school

"Working with DCPFS is very difficult - they seem to be more focussed on level of issues rather than trying to prevent." Metropolitan government school

"CPFS concerns….hard to prove neglect….gap in ability to provide support via neglect to 16 year olds." Metropolitan independent secondary school

"When we have had disclosures and reported them through the appropriate channels, staff are disillusioned because they are told by CPFS that the students are 16 so they will do nothing or they are not CPFS children and they do not follow up." Regional Catholic secondary school

"There are some agencies that take excessive periods of time to respond or responses are viewed as superficial. This tends to be more from CPFS and we understand that they may well be under resourced." Metropolitan government secondary school

"Department of Communities are under-resourced and struggle to provide for the high level of needs of our community." Regional primary school

"…currently we have no case worker in town. Follow up of concerns are being distributed to other officers who are a minimum of 300km away. When we do have a CPFS case worker they are over worked as they are the only case worker in town." Regional government primary school

Mental health, behavioural and emotional disorders

Access to specialised mental health care for students was also a significant and common challenge. The reasons for these challenges included living too far from services, families having limited financial capacity to access services, low parental involvement and family dysfunction, the presence of other complex issues or co-morbidities (e.g. disability), limited service availability, timely service provision and concerns about the effectiveness and suitability of particular services for certain students.

"Some serious and diagnosed – e.g. bipolar, PTSD and ASD; and others undiagnosed. We find that it is mostly these [undiagnosed and unsupported] issues, especially e.g. ASD and ADHD that leads to poor social skills, poor reading of social cues, and hence relational conflict and bullying issues." Metropolitan Catholic CaRE school

"Limited access to psychological services in regional areas, limited access to GPs with specialisation in adolescent mental health." Regional independent school

"CAMHS - as our students have a disability they don't accept them, justify it as this is a result of their disability and not mental health." Metropolitan education support centre

"Waitlist across all services (school based and external) are often very long and some external services can be up to 18 months." Metropolitan primary school

"I have made comment at times that we are not a mental health facility. Schools do the best they can with the resources at their disposal and skills of staff." Metropolitan Catholic secondary school

"The town is very short of support for anyone with mental health issues and due to poverty issues children are not being adequately diagnosed or supported." Regional primary school

While there were programs available that focused on promoting or maintaining good mental health, some responses identified a gap in services for younger students.

"Lack of resources/agencies that can support students in the age group of 6-11 years old with mental health issues." Metropolitan primary school

"Increasing number of children presenting at enrolment for Kindy already suffering from anxiety, some already having professional intervention and support." Metropolitan Catholic primary school

Survey respondents also identified challenges in trying to access appropriate educational supports for students with emotional regulation and behavioural problems and the lack of available options.

"Care schools need more available places." Metropolitan government secondary school

"Lack of intermediary funding for children at risk and displaying serious behaviours. Not able to fund EAs for short term contracts, without having to make them permanent. This is an issue if the child does not go on to receive any disability funding, yet Principal decides to put in school funds for immediate support." Primary school

"Nothing seems to work for students with severe behavioural issues." Secondary schools

"Care schools are all full and counselling or mental health services are difficult to access for many of our parents and students." Metropolitan government secondary school

Disability

Many schools reported struggling to provide the appropriate level of care and support for students with a disability, due to long delays in being able to access funding or services, challenges in navigating and receiving services through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the limited financial capacity to access services for both schools and families.

Significant gaps were also identified for students who demonstrated cognitive or learning disorders but who had either not had a formal diagnosis or were ineligible for funding support.

> *"Many health organisations (Beyond Blue, Headspace, etc) and doctors (GPs) are not knowledgeable in the area of disability- too easy to put it in the too hard basket."* Primary education support centre

> "[There are challenges in] *access to support groups and services for students with disabilities and learning difficulties."* Regional independent school

> *"The funding model penalises schools with a concentration of students with disabilities."* Metropolitan Catholic primary school

> *"...the more severe* [the disability] *the more difficult to get the resources required to assist. Often the School Psych is here for limited timing and with more and more students presenting with either a disability (undiagnosed) or mental health problems - it is difficult to manage."* Regional government public and secondary school

> *"...lack of funds to access medical professionals in order to attain a diagnosis for all forms of disabilities. This places huge pressure on the school as most negative child behaviours are linked to the inability of families to get timely access to services due to their own financial situation."* Metropolitan primary school

> *"Lack of support for students with learning difficulties that are difficult to identify / diagnose and do not fit into the prescribed categories which attract support."* Metropolitan primary school

Limited school capacity

Some school staff commented on the challenges they face in being able to address the magnitude of issues facing some students and that specialist support requirements for students often go beyond what a school can realistically provide.

> *"Many issues with students stem from home. School can only help so far."* Metropolitan government secondary school

> *"There are at times unrealistic expectations placed on schools as to what we are able to do."* Metropolitan Catholic secondary school

> *"Huge pressure placed on the school around curriculum and what a schools core business is. Societal issues impact on this school in such a way that no staff member can address all areas required despite them feeling that they must."* Metropolitan primary school

> *"The gaps and challenges involve assisting students in extreme distress because of mental health issues beyond the expertise of school based staff. Families in high level crisis mode need further access to more specialised care and support beyond the school setting."* Metropolitan Catholic primary school

There are also competing demands and priorities for schools in terms of delivering on academic outcomes as well as responding to student wellbeing needs.

"The other challenge is the friction between supporting students and ensuring that there is a rigorous education process in place. There are times when these two things compete for time and this is not helpful for our students." Metropolitan secondary school

"Once we direct funding to student services it is coming from somewhere else. What curriculum areas need to be cut so that we can support the students we have in our school." Metropolitan government secondary school

"The focus on pastoral care and supporting kids in a huge variety of ways, is at the cost of a rigorous academic focus. There is simply not enough time to do both well." Metropolitan primary school

"I'd have to say that the looming threat of the ATAR drinks up many of our pastoral hours." Metropolitan independent secondary school

"Teachers feel overwhelmed with the range of expectations of their role." Metropolitan government primary school

"The issue internally is time. If we put time into mental health support, which we have to, it comes from somewhere else." Metropolitan government secondary school

Overwhelmingly, school staff pointed to the lack of resources they had to address the growing wellbeing needs of their students.

"Ideally we need more staff who do not have a teaching role to provide support, resources and specialist programs / training." Primary education support centre

"The sheer volume of numbers of students who require a level of intervention and support beyond the capacity of the current resourcing of the school. A single student on a risk management plan for self-harm requires constant vigilance from approximately 6 staff on a daily basis from admin team to classroom teacher and EA support." Regional district high school

'[An issue is] *enough staff resources…..Money money money and time time time. More funding."* Regional independent school

"There is the inevitable funding issues that exist for schools and as a large high school we have had our funding cut which has had an impact on the extent to which we can resource our school to address the increasing wellbeing needs of our students." Metropolitan government secondary school

"School is grossly under resourced to deal with the local issues." Regional Catholic school

"[A challenge is our] *capacity to 'free up' staff to engage with students when and where needed. All staff are allocated roles and no money in the budget for the 'extra' personnel."* Regional government primary school

Access to school psychology services

The adequacy of the level of school psychology services provided was raised frequently.

"Access to psychologist services are very minimal with only 54 hours a year allocated to our school. Each student assessment by a psychologist takes approx. 20 hours which only leave us with 2-3 assessments a year." Metropolitan independent secondary school

"Allocation/calculation of FTE for school psychologists needs to be revised as it's not meeting the minimum requirement for our school. Then as a school you are expected to allocate resourcing to top up the FTE. Waitlists are too long through the public sector for parents and children to access specialist agencies." Primary school

"More counselling access and more assistance [is needed] *for students experiencing psychological distress or issues….funding made available….is getting smaller and smaller even though the extensive and comprehensive paperwork is diligently and conscientiously completed."* Regional Catholic primary school

"CEWA Psychologist Team are great but we do require more support at a school level." Catholic school

"Our school has purchased additional psych time to try to manage the case load (35 at risk students from a school population of 142). Our allocated time is 0.08FTE which the school has struggled to increase to 0.2FTE." Regional government primary school

"Often the School Psych is here for a limited time and with more and more students presenting with either a disability (undiagnosed) or mental health problems – it is difficult to manage." Regional government primary and secondary school

"Access to school psychological services is limited, reducing the number of students that can be assessed and is more focussed on the academic side rather than social/ emotional wellbeing of the child." Metropolitan primary school

"Allocation/calculation of FTE for school psychologists needs to be revised as its not meeting the minimum requirement for our school. Then as a school you are expected to allocate resourcing to top up the FTE." Anonymous respondent

Staff capacity

Survey responses identified the importance of committed staff to deliver wellbeing approaches. However, many of the participating schools acknowledged teachers and school staff often were not equipped with the required skills and knowledge to be able to support student wellbeing needs appropriately. They also identified there were challenges in building capacity across the school staff. This was also further compounded by a lack of access to specialised staff within schools, such as Education Assistants, psychologists and social workers.

"Limited training and expertise for school staff." Metropolitan secondary school

"Not enough Trauma Informed Practices PL available within DoE." Metropolitan Education Support school

"We also have very young teachers who are learning their trade and do not have the experience to fall back on when encountering problems." Regional Catholic primary school

"We do not have the expertise we need. We need more school psychologists and youth workers, nurses etc." Secondary school

"Nothing seems to work for students with severe behavioural issues." Metropolitan secondary school

The capacity of staff to support student wellbeing was also impacted by staff member's own wellbeing, including burnout and resistance to change.

"Staff attitude is a challenge to ensure they have high expectations, are non-judgemental and know that our school is not a school where accepting anything less than that child's best would ever be okay." Metropolitan primary school

"…change-over of teaching staff, lack of capacity/motivation of teachers, low expectations…" Remote community school

"…staff dealing with own personal issues impact their ability to address student wellbeing needs." Metropolitan Catholic secondary school

"Retention of staff, due to high daily mental health needs, prone to burn out." Metropolitan independent secondary school

"I am suffering compassion fatigue from dealing with the wellbeing factors associated with remote living and working in high trauma environments over the last nine years." Regional government school

"We have some teachers who are resistant to implementing programs recommended by specialist teachers." Metropolitan primary school

Parental and community engagement

Staff responses detailed challenges in engaging parents and subsequent barriers in supporting student wellbeing. Issues included parental distrust in the school, limited communication and information sharing between parents and schools, cultural barriers to engagement and factors that influence broader community engagement.

"Lack of engagement from some parents/guardian. Once the students are enrolled, it is extremely difficult to contact some of them for support." Regional Catholic secondary school

"Hard to maintain open and honest conversations with parents and community around some of the issues as they may be shameful for parents, e.g. FASD." Regional independent secondary school

"Not being told enough information at enrolment that would enable us to support the student from the beginning." Metropolitan Catholic secondary school

"Our community is very dysfunctional and although we have spent a significant sum of our budget on developing support structures, it isn't enough." Metropolitan secondary school

"Our young people are surrounded by influences outside of school, drugs and social media being two of them. It is difficult to be counter-cultural without the support of the whole community." Metropolitan independent primary and secondary school

There were also challenges identified in terms of parents and families being willing or capable of engaging with external supports and services to support their children.

"Families in crisis are often not sure what is available in the community, are given too many options without support, are unable to follow through with referrals and recommendations, aren't capable of sourcing support, isolated with no family support." Metropolitan Catholic primary school

"Parents can also hinder getting the correct support for their child as they don't recognise a problem." Metropolitan independent primary school

"Our biggest challenge is finding the right supports for families to be able to support their children. Often when supports are offered parents do not follow through, failing to keep appointments and having the agency move on to another family. Parents often do not want or see the need for agency assistance thus denying their children vital opportunities for success at school." Regional government primary school

"Parents are often not willing to get their child/ren assessed as they fear 'labelling' or are in denial about their child's condition. Parents often advise us of their unwillingness to medicate their child so refuse to get them diagnosed, e.g. for ADHD or anxiety, and expect the school to cope with disruptive behaviours." Metropolitan independent primary school

"Gaps include families reluctant to engage with services due to financial, cultural and personal reasons." Metropolitan government primary school

Tracking the impact

Some schools outlined ways in which they tracked improvements in student wellbeing arising from their initiatives. Positive impacts on the whole school community were noted as well as for specific vulnerable groups of students, including those with mental health issues, disability, physical health concerns, or experiencing child protection concerns.

"We have a deliberate and explicit Health and Wellbeing initiative for our students….trending data suggests that these are having a positive impact." Metropolitan government secondary school

"Key achievements: Reduced incidence of fighting, lower negative parent reactions, better wellbeing 'measurables' from surveys." Metropolitan independent secondary school

"NAPLAN results show an upward rather than downward trend…[and] a positive effect on all students, including those new students from other schools where they

were previously always in trouble and often suspended." Regional government primary school

"Student wellbeing was surveyed at the beginning of the year and most students responded very negatively to their social and emotional state. The school has put in place strategic targets for improvement and we are working with staff and other agencies to improve the outcomes for students." Regional government primary school

Some schools also acknowledged that there were difficulties in being able to measure student wellbeing outcomes and tracking the impact of strategies and initiatives.

"The system level expectation that learning improvements are based on NAPLAN data and there is no systemic measures for the wellbeing measures to know if you are making a difference. The only measure is attendance, which in our context continues to be dismal. It is a complex challenge with multiple layers of initiatives." Regional district high school

"Building trusting relationships takes time, effort and patience. The progress is often slow as the issues are complex and have many layers that you need to work through before you see the improvement in the child or circumstances. The progress is hard to measure in a traditional sense…" Metropolitan independent public school

Summary

The results from this school survey provide important insights into the experiences of education staff in addressing and responding to student wellbeing needs.

The views and practice examples shared can be used to further inform both the systemic and school-based approaches to supporting student wellbeing and strengthen approaches across the sectors.