

Wellbeing Australia Submission to the 2020 Summit
FOCUS: EDUCATION, SCHOOLS and the PRODUCTIVITY AGENDA

Wellbeing Australia is a network of individuals and organizations who acknowledge the importance of addressing positive social and emotional functioning within a strengths based framework. Our primary aim is to disseminate evidence-based practices to develop the wellbeing of children and young people so they become more self-aware, resilient, compassionate and engaged citizens. <http://www.wellbeingaustralia.com.au>

Many of the negative social issues facing Australia have their roots in poor relationships, unsupportive environments, the harmful expression or management of feelings, lack of empathic understanding and denial of agency leaving people feeling powerless and disengaged.

These issues include bullying, breakdown in relationships, family and community violence, poor mental health, poor academic engagement and performance, anti-social behaviour, substance abuse and addictions, child abuse and social injustice. These incur both financial and social exclusion costs.

There are Australian government policies and programs such as the Safe Schools and Health Promoting Schools Frameworks, Values Education, Drug Education and Mindmatters that address these issues. These initiatives have a common underlying goal: to enhance student wellbeing, defined as a state of positive psychological functioning that allows students to thrive, flourish and learn. These multiple initiatives, however, risk fragmentation of economic, physical and psychological resources.

The strong interdependence between student social-emotional wellbeing and learning is now well documented (Gerhardt, 2003, Zins et al 2004, Durlak et al 2008). School connectedness also promotes resilience and social inclusion (Libbey 2004). A focus on academic outcomes, therefore, needs to be enhanced by an equal emphasis on the social, emotional and cognitive domains of learning and development.

A proactive whole school approach to wellbeing requires a dual focus on relational quality within schools and opportunities for social and emotional learning. A coordinated approach therefore would include the development of pro-social values, safe and supportive school culture, social and emotional learning for staff and students, strengths based approaches to pedagogy, and the development of positive partnerships with families, early childhood providers and youth services. A zero tolerance approach to challenging behaviour needs to be replaced by positive and restorative approaches.

Teacher Education at both pre and in-service levels needs to have a higher focus on enhancing student wellbeing and the relational skills of educators.

Summary: "...the best way to prevent negative outcomes for children is to promote wellbeing throughout their lives, rather than only responding to vulnerability and crisis." (Children's Commission 2007) There are potential economic, psychological and physical benefits from a coordinated approach to wellbeing for young people. This includes short and long term benefits to the overall health of the nation and the future of Australian society.

References

Children's Commission (2007)

<http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/resources/publications/askchildren.cfm?>

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