Build back better: Student wellbeing, engagement and recovery in Australia

NOVEMBER 2020

Executive summary

COVID-19 is creating extraordinary challenges for children's welfare, wellbeing and learning. The potential harm to a generation is both immediate and long term, including diminished educational, health, employment and other life outcomes, with large fiscal and social costs.

However, these costs are not inevitable. With the right support and structures in place, children can emerge from this crisis stronger and more resilient than before, with enormous benefits for children themselves, their communities, and the future Australian economy and society.

Building back better from COVID-19 will require an approach that puts children at its centre and prioritises supporting student wellbeing and engagement. This is an opportunity not only to keep children learning and developmentally on track through the successive phases of managing the pandemic, but also to put in place the systemic foundations to improve long-term outcomes for this and future generations, especially those facing particular disadvantage.

Achieving this will require a strong national commitment, coordinated effort across levels of government and ministerial and departmental portfolios, and genuinely local and place-based approaches reflecting individual schools' and communities' circumstances.

Three clear priorities exist. To set up for the future, these are the actions to pursue now:

- Ensure specialist support for all students' social and emotional wellbeing no matter where they go to school

- Develop a national strategy to keep children on track and engaged with learning

- Establish strong national coordination and oversight arrangements to drive a focus on outcomes.

Children's wellbeing and resilience in disasters

Children's health and wellbeing are the foundations for successful learning, healthy development and long-term life outcomes. Engagement with learning is similarly fundamental.

Indeed, wellbeing, engagement and learning have been called the "three pillars of quality education"[1] and the "inextricable link" between wellbeing and learning is often noted.[2] This includes academic learning and broader child development, and is true for children of all ages, from preschool through the primary and middle years up to 18.

Social and emotional wellbeing is at the core of the concept of 'wellbeing'. This relates to how a person thinks and feels about themselves and others. It is fundamental to good mental health. For children, it is directly linked to both current and future quality of life.[3]

Good social and emotional wellbeing is especially important during adversity. It is what enables children to adapt, cope with challenges and emerge more resilient. Social and emotional wellbeing at once represents a set of characteristics placed under particular pressure by a disaster or other crisis – putting developmental milestones at risk – and a protective factor whose strength plays a significant part in determining children's ability to cope with the crisis itself.

The same is true of engagement with learning. When children face significant challenges, risks of disengagement increase at the very time that strong engagement is most important to continued learning. Maintaining student engagement is crucial to minimising the learning loss and developmental interruption that may otherwise occur when education and schooling are disrupted.

Child mental health

Children's mental health encompasses the psychological, social and emotional characteristics enabling a child to lead a happy and fulfilling life. Good child mental health is the basis of healthy development. It is far more than just the absence of disorders and ill-health.

Children's physical health is promoted through activities like physical exercise, good nutrition and immunisations. The same should be done for children's mental health and wellbeing through activities like emotional literacy building, social skills development and self-esteem building.

Social and emotional wellbeing

Children's social and emotional wellbeing includes **personal characteristics** such as emotional regulation, behavioural regulation, resilience and coping skills, self-esteem and confidence, and persistence in learning, and **social and interpersonal characteristics** such as the ability to identify emotions in others, the capacity to form and maintain relationships, and the development of social skills including empathy, trust, cooperation and conflict resolution.[4]
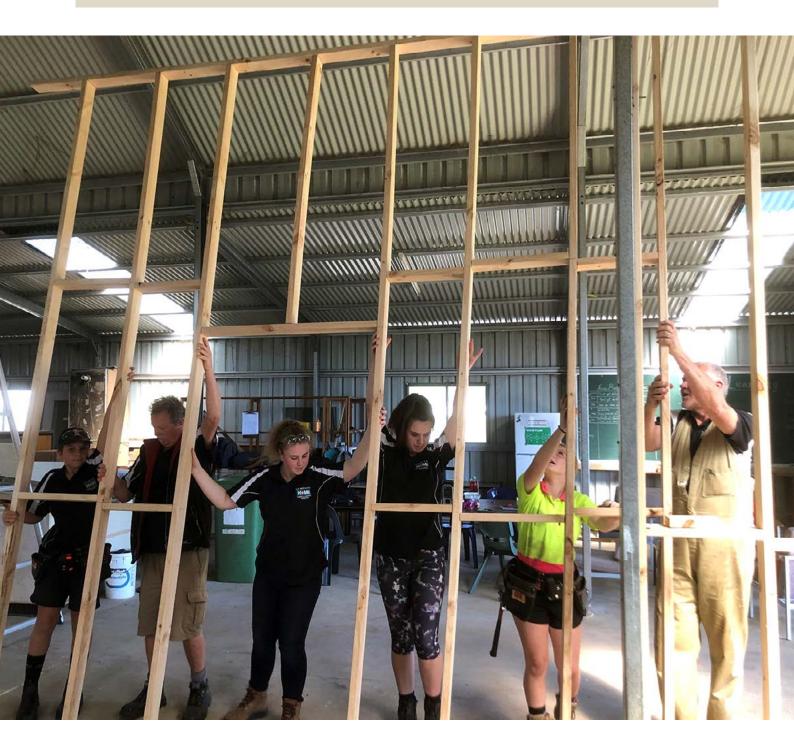
Children with high social and emotional wellbeing are optimistic, confident and engaged. They have a strong sense of purpose and they believe in themselves. They understand their own emotions, have positive relationships with others and are good at working through difficulties and resolving conflict.

Social and emotional wellbeing is affected by both individual and environmental characteristics.[5] It can be enhanced by effective support and interventions.[6]

Engagement with learning

Engagement with learning includes behavioural, emotional (or affective) and cognitive dimensions.[7] Students who are engaged with their learning feel connected to education and school; participate in academic and other activities at school; have a sense of belonging and inclusion at their school; believe they are learning and developing meaningful skills; take ownership of their learning; and feel that what they are doing at school is purposeful.

Disengagement can occur at different levels – with content, in class, with school or with education as a whole. It comprises a continuum including students who attend school but are disengaged in their classrooms – whether passively (ie present but inattentive) or more actively (eg exhibiting disruptive or aggressive behaviour) – as well as those who are repeatedly absent, and those who stop attending school altogether.[8]

COVID-19's impact on children

Children are particularly vulnerable to the psychological effects of community-wide emergencies and crises. They are affected in ways that are unique to children, varying according to their stage of development.[9] It has been estimated that nearly 1 in 3 children and young people experience lasting negative mental health and wellbeing effects for many years after an emergency such as a pandemic.[10]

COVID-19 is putting significant pressure on children's welfare and wellbeing. School disruptions, lost routines and sources of stability and support, fear of the virus and its effects on family and friends, financial and other pressures on families, and – for some children – isolation in increasingly unsafe homes are all contributing to rising stress and anxiety, greater exposure to violence and other safety risks, and reduced connection to schools and engagement with learning. While COVID-19's full impact cannot be known at this stage, it has characteristics that are comparable to an Adverse Childhood Experience in its own right, shared across a large proportion of Australian children, in addition to its cumulative effect in intensifying other adversities.[11]

Early research has highlighted these adverse wellbeing impacts,[12] consistent with evidence from past pandemics and comparable disasters.[13] Children themselves have identified mental wellbeing as a top concern relating to COVID-19 in Australia,[14] and parents have reported high rates of negative mental health impacts on their children.[15] This mirrors on-the-ground experience – especially in communities already experiencing challenges before COVID-19 – and the perspective of teachers and school leaders, who are uniquely placed to understand their students' needs.

> *"Many students returned to school after eight weeks of learning from home unsettled. Some students still haven't returned. Our wellbeing needs are higher than ever. Anxiety and mental health issues have increased. Family violence notifications have grown significantly. Social workers' caseloads are at capacity. Kids have come back to school less regulated so that makes other kids not want to be in the classroom with them and attendance has decreased."*
>
> *Holly Stewart, Assistant Principal, Sorell School, Tasmania, July 2020*[16]

Wellbeing challenges are especially acute for children with pre-existing vulnerabilities. This includes those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, at greater risk of violence and abuse in the home, experiencing pre-existing mental health difficulties, or directly affected by natural hazards and disasters such as drought and bushfires. COVID-19's compounding toll is falling hardest on those who were already most disadvantaged, least visible and least heard. These impacts can be expected to continue, and in many respects deepen, through the successive phases of the pandemic response and recovery over time.

> *"Wellbeing issues have accelerated for adolescents markedly during 2020. As an educator, I absolutely know that wellbeing underpins everything about student engagement and learning in schools, and never has this been more true than it is leading into a COVID-altered 2021. After a year of great anxiety and uncertainty our students are tired and fatigued, and some are questioning the certainties of a future that we once simply took for granted – employment, apprenticeships, university, a consistent wage, a 'normal' year at school. In terms of teaching and learning, if students don't have a distinct sense of wellbeing about where they fit at school, and where they fit with each other, their learning outcomes will be significantly diminished."*
>
> *John Ralph, Assistant Principal, Hawkesdale P12 College, Victoria, November 2020*[17]

Children are resilient, and many will recover from these stresses with no lasting ill-effects. But without appropriate support, many others will experience avoidable ongoing psychological distress and diminished wellbeing extending, in some cases, into adulthood.

Lower wellbeing is linked to lower engagement with learning, reduced educational attainment and achievement outcomes, and reduced employment outcomes.[18] There is evidence about specific effects following childhood exposure to a traumatic event such as a bushfire or pandemic.[19] The lifelong consequences for children experiencing these effects are significant, as are the broader fiscal and other costs to society.[20] Estimates of fiscal costs to Australian governments include:[21]

- Unresolved childhood trauma in adults has been estimated to cost $9.1 billion per annum.[22]

- Late intervention through crisis services for children and young people up to the age of 24, such as crisis mental health services, which could have been avoided through earlier intervention, has been estimated to cost $15.2 billion per annum.[23]

- Early school leaving has been estimated to cost $12.6 billion over the lifetime of each annual cohort of early school leavers, or around $315 million per annum for each annual cohort.[24]

COVID-19 and bushfires

While individual emergencies and disasters vary significantly in their nature and duration, their lasting impacts on children are similar.[25] Most past research on children and disasters has taken an 'all-hazards' approach or focused on natural hazards.[26] Meaningful parallels can be drawn between past disasters in Australia and the current pandemic's effects on children.[27]

Extensive research has demonstrated the lasting impact of bushfires on children in Australia.

- Abnormally high levels of emotional distress and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder have been found in children over periods ranging from six to 15 months after the 1994 NSW Sutherland Shire bushfire, the 2003 Canberra bushfires, and the 2005 Lower Eyre Peninsula bushfire, with generally greater severity among younger children.[28]

- Academic performance in reading and numeracy of primary students exposed to the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires has continued to suffer for at least several years after the fires (longer-term evidence is not yet available but may well show a continuing negative association), with learning loss increasing with the level of bushfire exposure experienced.[29]

- Children exposed to the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires were found, 20 years on, to have been "less likely to extend their education and their careers, and to be less socially mobile".[30]

The 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires can be expected to have at least comparable effects on children's wellbeing, educational and life outcomes, given their unprecedented scale and severity.[31] Without effective support for children's recovery, these harmful effects will be significantly compounded by COVID-19, which has impeded the crucial early stages of recovery from the fires and induced additional distress and trauma in its own right.

Social and emotional wellbeing, engagement and recovery

As long ago as 2014, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) identified improving social and emotional wellbeing as a priority to 'turn the curve' for Australia's children, and recommended "national implementation of evidence-based, whole-of-school interventions in every Australian school to promote resilience and emotional and mental health and wellbeing".[32] There is good evidence that school-based wellbeing programs can improve student outcomes in academic achievement as well as wellbeing-related domains such as socio-emotional, behavioural and cognitive adjustment.[33] This includes, among others, programs targeting school belonging and engagement, social-emotional skills, and behavioural skills.

Supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing is especially important during and after an emergency.[34] Support and intervention after an emergency should promote five key elements: a sense of safety, calming, a sense of self- and community efficacy, connectedness, and hope.[35] These elements underpin the principles of psychological first aid and are directly applicable to children.[36] When a crisis is continuing rather than time-limited in duration, the continuing need for such support is readily observable.

> *"The children are not only not engaged, but for this whole year I don't think our kids have truly felt safe. Things aren't predictable. And predictability equals safety. Everything is unpredictable so children aren't feeling safe."*
>
> *Mel Croan, Assistant Principal, Ulladulla Public School, NSW, September 2020*[37]

Reflecting the evidence, there is strong expert consensus that promoting children's wellbeing must be a first order priority in response to COVID-19 in Australia. This is not only about mitigating damage by reducing the pandemic's harm to children's wellbeing and the extent of learning loss that may occur, although that is critical. It is also about taking the opportunity to support and enhance children's wellbeing so that they emerge from these challenges more resilient, not less so.

Schools are consistently identified as vital to supporting children's wellbeing through the response to COVID-19. Comments in the Roadmap to Recovery prepared by the Group of Eight Australian universities are representative: schools are "uniquely placed to provide a safe and supportive space and to help emotional and social recovery post emergencies" but "this will be reliant on sufficient resources, training and support".[38]

Two themes emerge particularly strongly from the evidence: the importance of psychosocial support in schools and the need to keep all students engaged with learning.

Supporting students' psychosocial needs in schools

Psychosocial support promotes children's psychological, social and emotional wellbeing. It is delivered through trauma-informed approaches, and promotes social and emotional learning, coping and processing skills, post-disaster recovery and resilience.
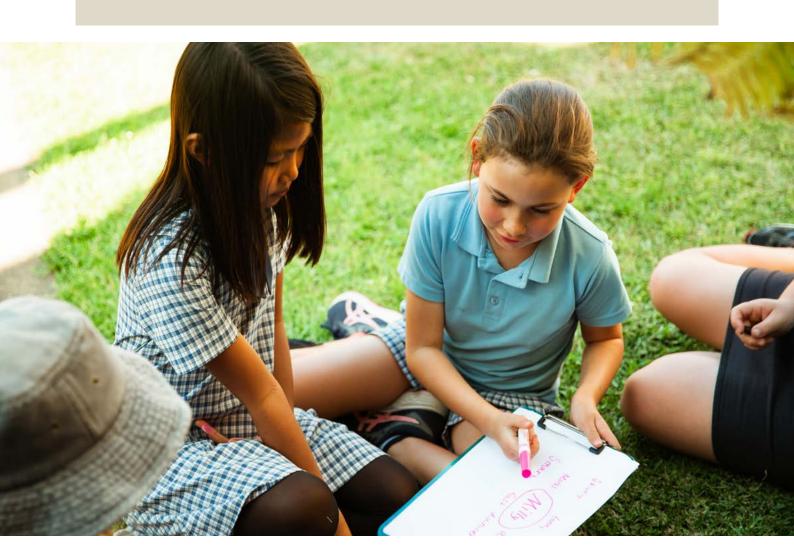
Schools are ideal settings for supporting children's wellbeing and recovery from distress and trauma. They are safe and readily accessible places where children are surrounded by peers and trusted adults, and an important source of support, stability and routine. Often, they are effectively the centre of their communities, especially in rural and remote areas.[39]

Globally, during and after an emergency, school-based psychosocial support is a standard part of supporting recovery and resilience. It is often made available to all students within schools whose communities have experienced a community-wide traumatic event.

COVID-19 and psychosocial support

The importance of psychosocial support in schools is a strong theme in policy recommendations about how to address COVID-19's impact on student learning and wellbeing. Examples include:

- *"Prioritise solutions to address psychosocial challenges before teaching"* (UNESCO, March 2020)[40]

- *"A first priority is to … provide psychosocial support through curriculum and pedagogy to improve social and emotional resilience … Access to relevant health and wellbeing services in recovery is particularly important"* (University of Melbourne, April 2020)[41]

- *"Provide ongoing social and emotional interventions as part of a wide-ranging school-based response to young peoples' wellbeing"* (Group of Eight Universities, April 2020)[42]

- *"Increase provision of protection, mental health and psychosocial support services in schools: These should … promote wellbeing through the use of socioemotional learning activities"* (Save the Children, July 2020)[43]

- *"Revise the curriculum focus and prioritise learning objectives … while ensuring good balance between academic, socio-emotional learning, and psychological health"* (OECD, August 2020)[44]

- *"In co-design with young people, identify opportunities to diversify and strengthen mental health and psychosocial support initiatives, including through schools, to foster skills to manage young people's mental health and wellbeing"* (UNICEF Australia, August 2020)[45]

All children in Australia should have access to specialist psychosocial support to promote their social and emotional wellbeing and resilience, regardless of where they go to school. Importantly, this should not be limited to children who have already been identified as struggling, as such a narrow approach will not reach all those who would benefit from support.

> *"Our student families and staff were impacted by the bushfires over 2019/2020 bushfire season. COVID-19 has impacted on our ability to engage with appropriate supports for students in supporting them around the impacts of the fires and has added its own challenges. The number of students presenting with needs for support is high and we believe that all students would benefit from support. It is very difficult for us to identify and prioritise which students are of greatest need as they are all needing emotional support."*
>
> *Pauline Canfield, Literacy Specialist, Lucknow Primary School, Victoria, November 2020*[46]

This is about promoting good mental wellbeing through preventive intervention rather than trying to address mental ill-health only once problems have emerged. A broad and preventive approach offers enormous benefits in keeping children progressing developmentally and able to focus on academic and other learning in schools, especially during periods of significant adversity.

It is also important that specialist psychosocial support be available to both primary and secondary students, including pre-primary students where needed. Wellbeing issues are increasingly being identified in children's primary years, and support for primary students' social and emotional needs is a known gap in Australia's past school-based disaster responses[47] – a gap which threatens to be replicated in the current response to COVID-19.

Keeping students engaged with learning

Research shows that disengagement from learning was already widespread in Australian classrooms before COVID-19.[48] Even passive disengagement and low-level disruption is highly harmful in its own right, for disengaged students themselves and for their peers.[49] It is also often a pathway to more serious disengagement or dropping out altogether.

The number of students in Australia who leave school early and will never return to complete year 12 or equivalent has been conservatively estimated at around 38,000 in each cohort of 19 year olds.[50] Another estimate suggests that, as at 2019, there may have been upwards of 50,000 compulsory school-aged children who had completely detached from education.[51]

Disengagement and early school leaving are strongly associated with poorer life outcomes. Lower engagement with learning, school attendance and completion rates, and levels of education generally are associated with less successful transitions to full time employment, lower incomes, greater reliance on welfare, worse health outcomes, and higher rates of criminal activity.[52]

COVID-19 threatens to turn what was already a national crisis into an irreparable rupture for a generation of students. The pandemic has disrupted children's learning, weakened their connection to schools, and significantly increased disengagement and risks of early school leaving, including students already at risk of disengagement and some who are newly vulnerable. Many children have lost contact with schools during the pandemic and some may never return. Sadly, this is precisely as experts anticipated early in COVID-19's onset.[53]

> *"Many students have a level of resilience in their personal 'tool box', but already disengaged and particularly vulnerable children with complex family histories and parenting issues struggled with remote learning and then the return to school. Some spent all day on technology and were not supported to go outside. Mum may have received funding for WiFi to support remote learning, but the children actually spent all day and night playing games online. Back at school the children are less tolerant relating to others and engagement in the classroom for a full day at school is even harder. These kids want to go home and go back online. They are struggling with social interaction. We need interventions to provide a critical incentive to come to school, and a safe space to rebuild connection and relationships with staff and peers."*
>
> *School wellbeing leader, Tasmania, November 2020*[54]

Engagement is the foundation for learning. To address the learning loss and wellbeing impacts caused by COVID-19, it is critical to keep **all** students engaged with education and schooling. Only then can the full benefit of initiatives that specifically target academic learning loss be realised. A student who is not engaged with education cannot learn effectively.

Engagement strategies must include a particular focus on students who are most at risk. In developing strategies to address disengagement, governments should draw on the substantial evidence base about how to identify these students.

Disengagement and early school leaving are strongly associated with low socio-economic status at both school and individual student level,[55] and with other sources of educational disadvantage such as remoteness and Indigeneity.[56] In responding to the pandemic's effects, general predictors of disengagement remain relevant, including educational performance, student behaviour, demographic factors, student attitudinal factors, and family-related factors (especially socio-economic status and levels of family educational support). Also relevant are predictors that are specific to COVID-19 such as the extent to which a student's learning and family environment have been directly affected by the pandemic.[57]

Governments should also draw on – and seek to further build and make widely available – the evidence about what works to support students to maintain and rebuild engagement with learning. This includes a combination of whole-school approaches, more targeted group-based programs and interventions in the school environment, and proactive individual support and follow-ups at schools and in homes.[58] In the context of COVID-19, actively removing technological and other barriers to engagement with learning is crucial. Moreover, in transitioning back to school sites after a pandemic or other disaster, supporting student social and emotional wellbeing becomes especially important to maintaining engagement.[59]

Roles and responsibilities in addressing school disengagement

The State, Territory and Commonwealth governments each play crucial, and complementary, roles in addressing disengagement from learning.

States and Territories are the managers of their school systems. They directly administer their own government schools, establish curricula, register and regulate schools, and provide funding and support for schools in their jurisdictions. They are also responsible for significant elements of other service systems relevant to keeping students engaged.

The Commonwealth has an established national leadership role working with the States and Territories on important school education policy areas,[60] as well as responsibility for primary mental health care. It is also responsible for the national economy and economy-wide policy decisions. This is significant because disengagement and early school leaving have significant implications for Australia's future productivity and fiscal position, especially with the impact of COVID-19.

Taken together, this means the Commonwealth government has a clear mandate and unique capacity to take a leadership role in addressing school disengagement at a national level, especially in responding to COVID-19.

The Commonwealth also has a significant stake in reducing disengagement and school dropouts as it will bear the majority of the large associated downstream costs in increased welfare reliance, reduced income tax receipts, higher use of the public health system and other direct costs.[61]

Putting students at the centre

To successfully engender student wellbeing, maintain engagement, and support recovery from COVID-19 and other compounding stressors, students must be at the centre of all responses.

By their nature, child development and student wellbeing, engagement and post-disaster recovery span multiple portfolios across both the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments. They cannot be effectively addressed by individual governments, or through single-portfolio strategies. At the same time, 'one size fits all' approaches that do not take into account local circumstances, capacities and needs will not be effective.

Putting students at the centre of responses will require genuine coordination between the different levels of government, directed at shared outcomes, and recognising the different roles and responsibilities – and policy and funding levers – of each. It will also require joining up between the education, health, mental health, and child welfare systems, as well as coordination with emergency and disaster response, recovery and resilience activities.

The Commonwealth Government has indicated that, following the 2020 COAG Council Review, regular ongoing meetings of both Education and Health Ministers will separately continue.[62] In parallel, a Mental Health National Cabinet Reform Committee has been established. [63] A National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy has been under development since before the pandemic,[64] along with ongoing but uncoordinated work within jurisdictions to address student wellbeing, engagement and recovery issues.

However, there is no national mechanism to bring student wellbeing and engagement issues together and no articulated plan of action to address these issues. These absences are especially pressing given the short and long-term social, emotional and broader recovery needs of students. Institutional arrangements will need to be in place at a national level to achieve such a focus. These national arrangements should be designed to ensure strong oversight and accountability, shared outcomes across levels of government and portfolios, and meaningful alignment with other key strategies and frameworks.

Importantly, this joined-up work at the national level should be guided by a strong awareness of the importance of local context to what works in supporting wellbeing, engagement and recovery. To be effective, approaches must be local and place-based, and reflect individual school and community priorities and needs.

What is needed is national coordination and oversight combined with arrangements to ensure support is available everywhere that it is needed, in a way that enables individual communities and schools to access programs and other supports that meet their students' particular needs. Only then will the response to COVID-19 avoid replicating and reinforcing the long-standing siloing and disconnectedness of responses to these issues and resultant failure to adequately address them.

Building on existing initiatives

Governments have increasingly recognised the importance of the 'non-cognitive' aspects of education and the need to focus on student health, wellbeing and engagement in schools.

Significant work is underway in some States to increase the availability of mental health practitioners and student wellbeing officers in schools,[65] and to enhance teachers' mental health skills so they can directly support students, in addition to school-based wellbeing, engagement and positive behaviour strategies. There has also been significant investment by the Commonwealth and State governments in child and adolescent mental health services. These are generally focused on clinical services, counselling and early intervention where mental health problems are already emerging. In many cases, efforts have accelerated in response to the 2019-20 bushfires and the pandemic.

These initiatives are welcome and much needed. However, even before the extraordinary events of 2020, it was clear that significant gaps remained, with continuing under-investment in student wellbeing and engagement relative to their importance and a lack of a coordinated focus on these crucial issues – particularly where significant community-level stressors and trauma are present.

> *"Since students returned to school, we have been seeing a lot of social issues around turn taking, sharing and negotiation, and more protectiveness and conflict in play areas. Some students are anxious that they have fallen too far behind and won't catch up. They have lost confidence in themselves and in their friendships. Their stamina for engaging with learning has diminished substantially. We are also seeing some school refusal as well."*
>
> *Helen Basham, Assistant Principal, Mount Evelyn Primary School, Victoria, November 2020*[66]

Filling these gaps has now become urgent. Students need immediate access to specialist support through their schools, to process their experiences, restore resilience, stay engaged, and refocus on learning. This is a need shared by all students to varying degrees. Crucially, it is not limited to students who have already been identified, or who have self-identified, as experiencing mental health difficulties. Support services in schools need to reflect this by being made available to all students who need it, not just those already visibly struggling. Now more than ever, they are essential services.

In providing this support, building and upskilling school workforces and allied health support is important. But it will not be enough. School workforces are already heavily overburdened, especially with transitions between remote and face-to-face learning and other disruptions caused by COVID-19. Relying heavily on the existing workforce risks asking too much of an already stretched schooling system and its staff.

With the best possible will, teachers and existing school-based staff cannot provide the kind of specialist social and emotional support that students need in these unprecedented circumstances. Moreover, large workforce reforms take time, but students need focused and specialist support now. It is vital that governments prioritise the availability of this support in the near term.

Recommendations

There are three major areas where more needs to be done to support student wellbeing, engagement and recovery in the wake of COVID-19:

1. Providing access to specialist support services for all students' social and emotional wellbeing
2. Developing a national strategy to keep students engaged with learning
3. Establishing national coordination and oversight of student wellbeing, engagement and recovery initiatives.

Recommendation 1: Provide access to specialist support services for all students' social and emotional wellbeing

Governments should jointly ensure the availability of evidence-based psychosocial support programs for students' social and emotional wellbeing and resilience in every school, prioritising schools with the greatest need.

- Support could be phased over time to initially focus on schools with the greatest need. However, it should be made widely available within relevant schools rather than being limited to only those children who have already been identified as struggling.

- Need would be assessed based on indicators of relevant disadvantage and risk, including community-level socioeconomic characteristics, exposure to severe natural hazards and disasters, regional and remote location, pre-existing incidence of serious mental ill-health, and level of impact by COVID-19.

- The initiative could initially be time limited, but with future consideration given to extending and/or bridging into longer term recovery support. For example, it could initially apply during the 2021 school year.

- The Commonwealth and State and Territory governments could jointly fund the initiative, with the Commonwealth contribution in each State and Territory based on population and need.

- States would have flexibility in how this was delivered provided that the requirements to use evidence-based programs in schools were met. They could use unspent funds on other related purposes as agreed with the Commonwealth government.

Recommendation 2: Develop a national strategy to keep students engaged with learning

Governments should jointly develop a national strategy on disengagement which is aligned with individual jurisdictions' plans and activities. The strategy should include:

- Developing improved nationally consistent data collection to more effectively measure student wellbeing and engagement outcomes during school-age years

- Regularly reporting on student wellbeing and engagement in a form that can be disaggregated to school level and analysed against student learning and attendance data, integrated with the existing My School website – this could be described as a 'NAPLAN for wellbeing'

- Developing a national evidence base to help schools across Australia identify 'what works' to support disengaged young people, potentially through the National Evidence Institute

- Ensuring that high quality evidence-based programs with demonstrated impact in re-engaging students or keeping at-risk students engaged are available to all schools across Australia, including mechanisms to support proven programs to scale nationally

- Time-bound action plans with clear roles, responsibilities and actions for each jurisdiction.

Recommendation 3: Establish national coordination and oversight of student wellbeing, engagement and recovery initiatives

A national working group on student wellbeing, engagement and school-based recovery should be established to develop, coordinate and oversee all initiatives relating to these matters.

- The working group should comprise senior officials from all jurisdictions and report jointly to Commonwealth and State and Territory Health and Education Ministers.

- Officials and Ministers with responsibility for disaster recovery and resilience should be involved as needed.

- The working group's activities should be aligned and integrated with the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and its implementation.

- The working group's work should be guided by an awareness of the importance of local and place-based approaches to student wellbeing, engagement and recovery.

- The working group's remit should include, among others, the initiatives described in Recommendations 1 and 2 of this policy brief: access to support services for all students' social and emotional wellbeing, and a national strategy to keep students engaged with learning.

About Save the Children

Save the Children is Australia's leading child rights organisation. Guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and with a primary focus on children's best interests and outcomes, Save the Children advocates for policy reform and systemic change to advance children's rights in Australia and directly delivers services to over 30,000 children in around 200 communities each year.

The recommendations in this brief are based on policy analysis, research, and insights and evidence drawn from Save the Children's services, partnerships and programs which directly support children and families in many of Australia's most disadvantaged communities.

Images in this policy brief are of participants in Save the Children's school-based wellbeing and engagement programs, and quotations from school leaders have been provided by staff at schools where Save the Children's programs are being delivered.

For further information about this policy brief, please contact Howard Choo, Australian Social Policy and Advocacy Adviser, Save the Children at howard.choo@savethechildren.org.au.

References

1   Centre for Adolescent Health, 2018, *Student wellbeing, engagement and learning across the middle years,* Murdoch Children's Research Institute, p 14.

2   Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE), 2018, *Every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools – an environmental scan,* NSW Department of Education, p 3.

3   Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2012, 'Social and emotional wellbeing: development of a children's headline indicator', p 8; AIHW, 2020, *Australia's children – Social and emotional wellbeing,* available from https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/health/social-and-emotional-wellbeing.

4   AIHW, 2012, above n 3, pp 12-13.

5   AIHW, 2012, above n 3, pp 14-22.

6   J Durlak et al, 2011, 'The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions', Child Development 82: 405-32.

7   J Fredricks, P Blumenfeld and A Paris, 2004, 'School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence', *Review of Educational Research* 74(1): 59-109.

8   K Hancock and S Zubrick, 2015, *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school*, Telethon Kids Institute, prepared for the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, pp 14-17.

9   G Bonanno et al, 2010, 'Weighing the costs of disaster: Consequences, risks, and resilience in individuals, families, and communities', *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 11(1): 1-49; J M Furr et al, 2010, 'Disasters and youth: A meta-analytic examination of posttraumatic stress', *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology* 78(6): 765-80; L Peek et al, 2017, 'Children and disasters', ch 13 in H Rodríguez et al (eds), *Handbook of Disaster Research,* Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research, pp 243-62.

10   H Cahill et al, 2020, *Natural disasters and pandemics: Supporting student and teacher wellbeing after a crisis,* Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, p 12.

11   R Oral et al, 2016, 'Adverse childhood experiences and trauma informed care: The future of health care', Pediatric Research 79(1): 227-33; I Bryce, 2020, 'Responding to the accumulation of adverse childhood experiences in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for practice', *Children Australia* 45: 80-7.

12   S Whittle et al, 2020, '*Parenting and child and adolescent mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic*', https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/ag2r7 (Australia); X Xie et al, 2020, 'Mental health status among children in home confinement during the coronavirus disease 2019 outbreak in Hubei Province, China', *JAMA Pediatrics* 174(9): 898-900; M Orgilés et al, 2020, 'Immediate psychological effects of the COVID-19 quarantine in youth from Italy and Spain', https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/5bpfz; Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2020, B*uilding a country that works for all children post COVID-19* (UK); M Loades et al, 2020, 'Rapid systematic review: The impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents in the context of COVID-19', *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.009.

13   J Clinton, 2020, S*upporting vulnerable children in the face of a pandemic*, April 2020, Centre for Program Evaluation, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne; Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2020, *Technical note: Protection of children during the coronavirus pandemic, version 2,* May 2020; M Sistovaris et al, 2020, *Child welfare and pandemics: Literature scan***,** Fraser Mustard Institute of Human Development, University of Toronto; M E Loades et al, 2020, 'Rapid systematic review: The impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents in the context of COVID-19', J*ournal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, June 2020, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.009.

14   UNICEF Australia, 2020, *"Swimming with sandbags": The views and experiences of young people in Australia five months into the COVID-19 pandemic,* August 2020; yourtown and Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020, *Impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people who contact Kids Helpline,* September 2020.

15   Royal Children's Hospital, 2020, *National Child Health Poll: August 2020*, available from https://www.rchpoll.org.au/polls/covid-19-pandemic-effects-on-the-lives-of-australian-children-and-families/.

16   Quotation supplied to Save the Children.

17   Quotation supplied to Save the Children.

18   Deloitte Access Economics, 2012, *The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving*, available from http://handsonlearning.org.au/DAE_investing_in_preventing_ESL_via_HOL_September_2012.pdf; K Hancock et al, 2013, *Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts*, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, University of Western Australia; S Lamb et al, 2015, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015*: *Who succeeds and who misses out*, Mitchell Institute; Centre for Adolescent Health, above n 1; N Brown et al, 2020, *Learning at home during COVID-19: Effects on vulnerable young Australians,* University of Tasmania

19   L Gibbs et al, 2019, 'Delayed disaster impacts on academic performance of primary school children', *Child Development* 90(4): 1402-12.

20   Deloitte Access Economics, above n 18; S Lamb and S Huo, 2017, *Counting the costs of lost opportunity in Australian education*, Mitchell Institute.

21   These represent fiscal costs only, and do not include wider social costs which would be substantially higher. The estimates are not specific or directly applicable to the circumstances of COVID-19, but are provided to give an indication of the scale of the costs of reduced wellbeing in children when not addressed.

22   C Kezelman et al, 2015, *The cost of unresolved childhood trauma and abuse in adults in Australia,* Pegasus Economics, prepared for Adults Surviving Child Abuse.

23   W Teager, S Fox and N Stafford, 2019, *How Australia can invest early and return more: A new look at the $15b cost and opportunity,* Early Intervention Foundation, Front Project and CoLab at the Telethon Kids Institute.

24   Lamb and Huo, above n 20.

25   Cahill et al, above n 10, pp 8-13.

26   Peek et al, above n 9, p 247.

27   See, eg, Clinton, above n 13.

28   CESE, 2020, *The impact of bushfires on student wellbeing and student learning: Environmental scan*, NSW Department of Education, pp 10-11.

29   Gibbs et al, above n 19.

30   A McFarlane and M Van Hooff, 2009, 'Impact of childhood exposure to a natural disaster on adult mental health: 20-year longitudinal follow-up study', *British Journal of Psychiatry* 195: 142-8, p 144.

31   In relation to children in the 2019-20 bushfires, see Save the Children Australia, 2020, Children's experiences and needs in the 2019-20 bushfires: *Consolidated submission to inquiries into the 2019-20 bushfire season*, available from https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/34d65730-536f-43c6-aaa8-1cdca0c710c3/save-the-children-submission-children-s-experiences-and-needs-in-the-2019-20-bushfires-(1).pdf.aspx.

32   ARACY, 2014, The Nest action agenda, p 17.

33   K Dix et al, 2020, *Student wellbeing: Systematic review,* Australian Council for Educational Research and Evidence for Learning.

34   See above nn 9-10.

35   S Hobfoll et al, 2007, '*Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence'*, Psychiatry 70(4): 283-315.

36   L Gibbs et al, 2014, '*Where do we start? A proposed post-disaster intervention framework for children and young people',* Pastoral Care in Education 32(1): 68-87.

37   Quotation supplied to Save the Children. Ulladulla Public School is in the Shoalhaven region on the NSW coast – an area heavily affected by the 2019-20 bushfires.

38   Group of Eight Australia, 2020, *COVID-19 roadmap to recovery: A report for the nation*, p 129.

39   C Mutch, 2015, 'The role of schools in disaster settings: Learning from the 2010-2011 New Zealand earthquakes', *International Journal of Educational Development* 41: 238-91.

40   UNESCO, 2020, *COVID-19: 10 Recommendations to plan distance learning solutions*, available from https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-10-recommendations-plan-distance-learning-solutions.

41   Clinton, above n 12, p 17.

42   Group of Eight Australia, above n 38, p 129.

43   Save the Children, 2020, Save our education: *Protect every child's right to learn in the COVID-19 response and recovery*, p 73.

44   OECD, 2020, *Combatting COVID-19's effect on children*, p 26.

45   UNICEF Australia, above n 14.

46   Quotation supplied to Save the Children. Lucknow Primary School is in Bairnsdale, East Gippsland – an area heavily affected by the 2019-20 bushfires.

47   Gibbs, above n 36; Save the Children analysis.

48   P Goss and J Sonnemann, 2017, *Engaging students: Creating classrooms that improve learning,* Grattan Institute.

49   Ibid.

50   Lamb et al, above n 18. Updated census data suggests an increase in the proportion of 19 year olds who have completed senior secondary school or equivalent qualifications, but continues to show high rates of non-completion and significant inequalities among different population groups: S Lamb et al, 2020, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2020: Who succeeds and who misses out,* Mitchell Institute, pp 37-44.

51   J Watterston and M O'Connell, 2019, *Those who disappear: The Australian education problem nobody wants to talk about,* Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne.

52   J Abbott-Chapman et al, 2014, 'The longitudinal association of childhood school engagement with adult educational and occupational achievement: findings from an Australian national study', *British Educational Research Journal* 40(1): 102-20; Deloitte Access Economics, above n 18; Lamb and Huo, above n 20.

53   See, eg, Brown et al, above n 18, pp 29-31; Clinton, above n 13, pp 10-11; C Drane, L Vernon and S O'Shea, 2020, *The impact of 'learning at home' on the educational outcomes of vulnerable children in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic,* National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, p 7.

54   Quotation supplied to Save the Children.

55   Goss and Sonnemann, above n 48, p 11; Lamb et al, above n 18, pp 54-5; W Tomaszewski, N Xiang and M Western, 2020, 'Student engagement as a mediator of the effects of socio-economic status on academic performance among secondary school students in Australia', *British Educational Research Journal* 46(3): 610-30.

56   Lamb et al, above n 18, p 55.

57   Evidence for Learning, 2020, *Identifying and taking action for students at risk of disengagement from school during the phases of the COVID-19 response,* Insights Paper, pp 13-19.

58   See, eg, M Rickinson, B Kunstler and M Salisbury, 2019, *Insights for early action: Literature review,* Monash University.

59   Mutch, above n 39; Evidence for Learning, above n 57, pp 29-39.

60   Examples include the Australian Curriculum, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, Education Services Australia, the National Evidence Institute, support for the Teach for Australia program, investment in other programs addressing specific cohorts and needs, and support to boost literacy and numeracy outcomes and parental engagement.

61   Lamb and Huo, above n 20; Save the Children analysis.

62   Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Effective Commonwealth-State relations,* accessed 28 October 2020, available from https://www.pmc.gov.au/domestic-policy/effective-commonwealth-state-relations.

63   Scott Morrison, Prime Minister of Australia, Media statement dated 23 October 2020, available from https://www.pm.gov.au/media/national-cabinet-1.

64   Greg Hunt, Minister for Health, Media release dated 14 August 2019, available from https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-greg-hunt-mp/media/building-a-mentally-and-physically-healthy-australia.

65   The titles of these positions and roles vary between States and Territories.

66   Quotation supplied to Save the Children.