

# FRAMEWORK *for* STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

TEACHER RESOURCE



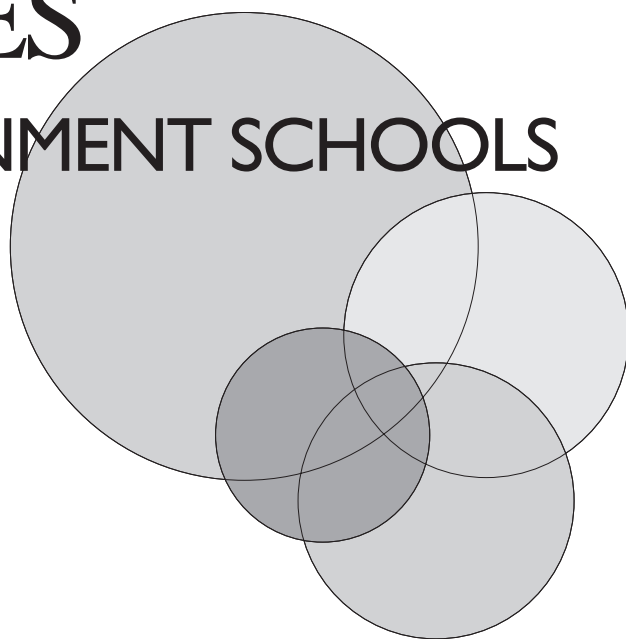
**EDUCATION VICTORIA**

*Achievement through*

# FRAMEWORK *for* STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

IN VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

TEACHER  
RESOURCE



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# PURPOSE OF THE TEACHER RESOURCE MATERIALS

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Students are better prepared for learning when they are healthy, safe and happy.

All children and young people need care and support as they grow towards adulthood.

The *Teacher Resource* document is designed to assist schools, teachers and student support staff to strengthen student welfare and curriculum support in schools. Such support should help to maximise all students' access to teaching and learning and help them to develop as healthy, secure and resilient people.

## The role of teachers

It is fundamental to acknowledge that student welfare is the responsibility of all staff working in a whole school context. Each teacher has a vital role as a source of support and determinant of success for students. The most significant amount of students' time, apart from family, is spent with teachers who are often the most important adult connection – the first contact point for many issues and services.

This document is one of a series which explains the origin and aims of the *Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools* and outlines strategies to support:

- all children and young people
- children and young people experiencing difficulty in schooling
- those at risk of harm
- those in crisis situations.

Schools can and do provide a strong foundation for student wellbeing when student support is a whole-school priority. This material is intended to assist schools to meet that priority by:

- establishing common understandings about the *Framework*
- exploring the implications of the *Framework* for schools, particularly the need for increased focus on primary prevention and early intervention strategies
- developing a whole-school policy which documents infrastructure, practices and programs to support students
- developing strategies to identify student wellbeing issues in each school
- communicating examples of good practice used in schools and classrooms
- increasing awareness of areas of need for the professional development
- highlighting the need for cooperation and collaboration between schools and other service providers to ensure continuity of care for children and young people
- focusing on the benefits of partnerships between schools and community
- considering change management issues in schools
- outlining the *School Focused Youth Service* initiative
- linking with Department of Education (DoE) Priorities for Schools 1998-2000.

# INTRODUCTION

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Student learning cannot be separated from student welfare.

Teachers and student support services staff can work together to help students learn effectively and develop positive attitudes and behaviours.

The personal, ethical and interpersonal development of young people constitute three intertwined and important curriculum issues ... Schools do not only teach subject matter or develop instrumental skills. They are necessarily involved in shaping young people (and they) deliberately provide opportunities for young people to reflect upon and shape themselves in intrapersonal and interpersonal ways.

Ainley et al, 1998

Providing all students with the kind of environment that will best nurture their development has long been a challenge for teachers, parents and support service staff. Teachers know that the social and emotional issues of students evident in schools have great impact upon the community and can create serious, ongoing problems. Every teacher can play an important role in prevention and early intervention programs and activities to strengthen the resilience of students as they learn and develop.

It is a 1998-2000 Department of Education (DoE) priority to 'strengthen student welfare and curriculum support designed to maximise all students' access to teaching and learning'. In response, schools are linking student support with curriculum programs, school operations and school management policies and practices.

## Whole-school approach

A whole-school approach to student support is based upon the needs of the students and the whole-school community. Students at school do not learn within a vacuum. They bring with them from their home and community a wide range of strengths and weaknesses that will impact upon their potential to learn.

A whole-school approach to student support should include strategies to help teachers identify student needs, take action to meet these needs within the school program and to monitor and review progress.

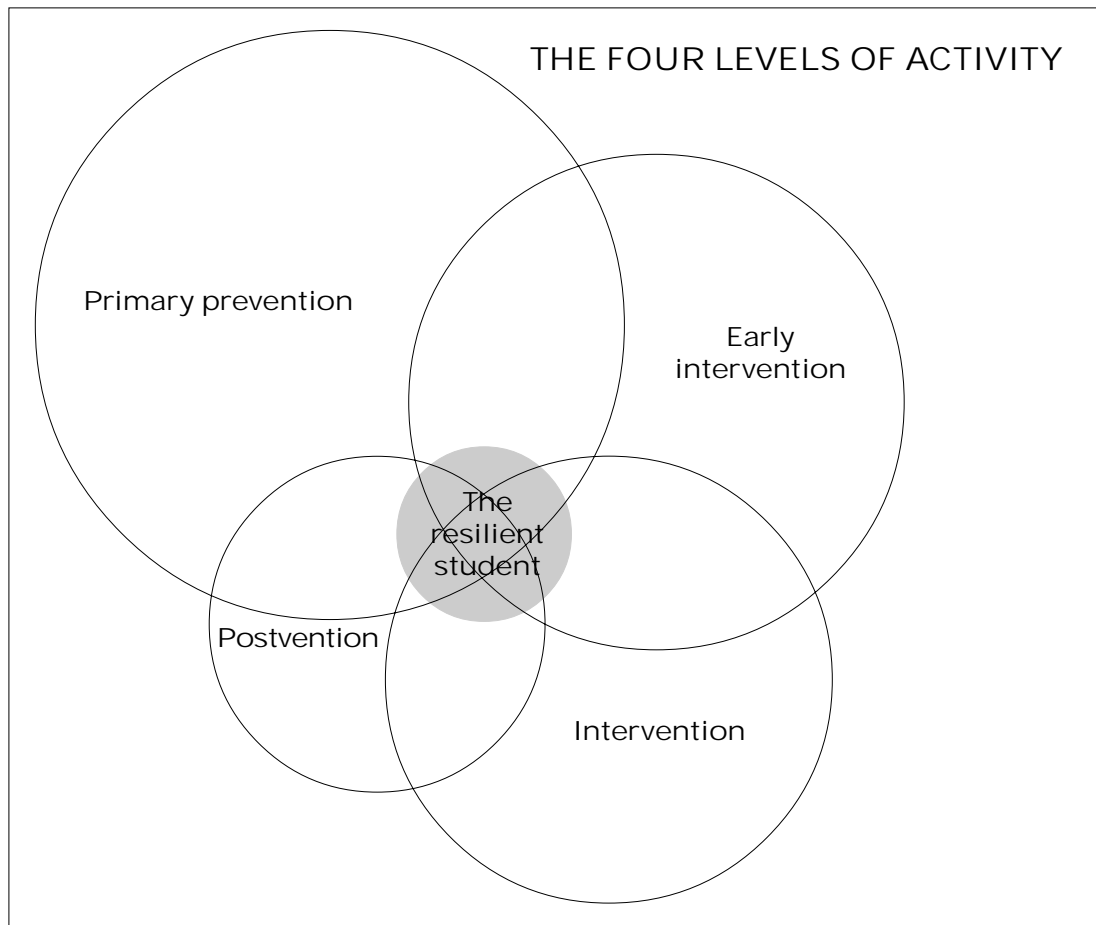
All teachers have a responsibility to respond when students experience difficulty with their schooling, so it is imperative that they identify and act on their concerns to enable early and effective intervention for students. Risks for students may involve individual, social, emotional or physical factors, or may be related to family or community factors. Classroom teachers need to be supported by a planned, sequential and detailed whole-school approach to student support with appropriate professional development to assist the implementation of strategies.

Teachers need to 'believe they can make a difference and have a commitment to do so ... a belief in the capacity of all students to make progress, given sufficient time and support'.

Hill & Crevola, 1998

## The Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools

The *Framework* describes principles, arrangements and the additional resources provided to enable a significant strengthening of student welfare and support services. It outlines how a continuum of services can be provided to students and their families within a comprehensive and integrated framework, with an increasing emphasis on preventive approaches and early intervention activities.



The *Framework* outlines four interrelated levels to group together the wide range of activities currently being undertaken by schools and related support services:

- 1 primary prevention
- 2 early intervention
- 3 intervention
- 4 postvention.

To an extent, these levels overlap and span the range of provision of care from the support needed for all children and young people to the support needed in crisis situations.



1 Primary prevention –

the broadest area of activity, relating to all students.

Main message: ***Build belonging and promote wellbeing***

2 Early intervention –

a substantial area of timely activity for students identified as at risk.

Main message: ***Strengthen coping and reduce risk***

3 Intervention –

the area that involves a range of student support services for a smaller number of students with serious problems.

Main message: ***Access support and provide treatment***

4 Postvention –

the area of out-of-the ordinary traumas, emergencies and tragedies that needs careful planning to enable appropriate response.

Main message: ***Manage trauma and limit impact***

## School Focused Youth Service

The *Framework* incorporates the *School Focused Youth Service*, a joint initiative of the Department of Education and the Department of Human Services. This initiative was designed to develop a continuum of services to enhance the effectiveness of links between the primary prevention and early intervention work done by teachers, schools, school-based support services and the secondary level of intervention provided by the community sector. It is structured to assist the implementation of an integrated service model to provide coordinated health and welfare services to all young people as well as ‘at risk’ young people and their families within local schools and community clusters.

## Comprehensive, well-coordinated response to the needs of students

Implementing the *Framework* will assist schools, school support service staff and community agencies and services to develop a comprehensive and well-coordinated approach to promoting the wellbeing of Victorian school students and to supporting them throughout their school years and beyond.

# GETTING STARTED

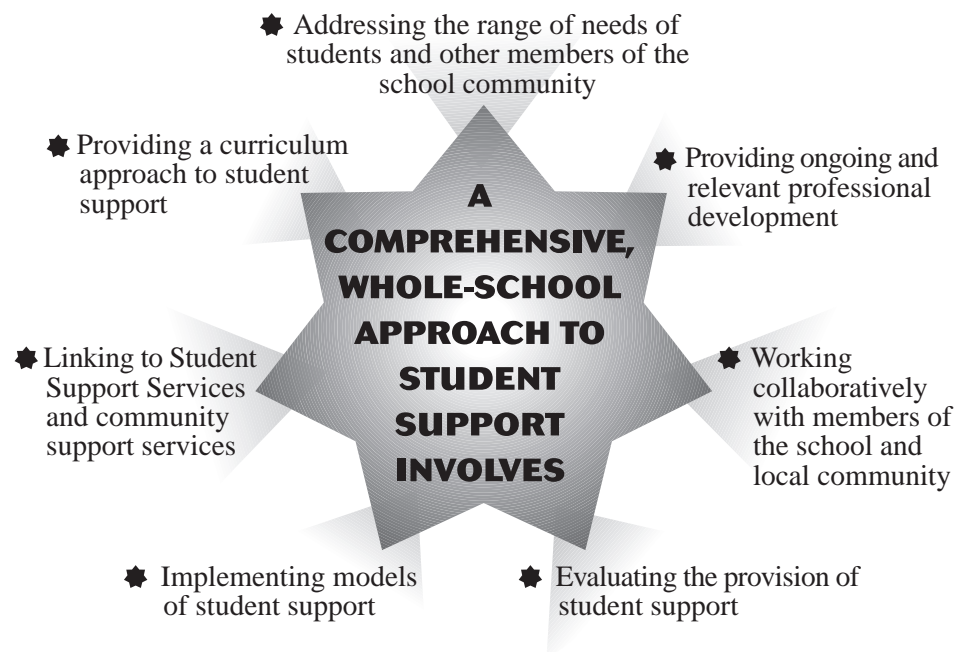
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## WHAT DOES THE *FRAMEWORK* MEAN FOR SCHOOLS?

### Schools can implement the *Framework* by:

- using it as the basis for development, implementation and review of the school charter and all other relevant school planning processes
- developing and maintaining positive, caring school environments and by systematically working on the quality of relationships within the school community
- adopting strategic and collaborative approaches to address the health and wellbeing of students; within the school community as well as with other schools, regional student support services staff and in partnership with community agencies
- supporting students at all points of the continuum, from primary prevention to postvention
- targeting professional development for staff at knowledge and skills in areas concerning communication with students and parents, recognising the needs of vulnerable students and accessing appropriate support for them.

Some schools already provide a comprehensive continuum of support for students at all levels of the *Framework*. Others may wish to revise their provision of support for students at each level in the context of framework recommendations.



## **1 Addressing the needs of students and other members of the school community**

Students come to school with a wide range of strengths and weaknesses that impact on their potential to learn. Schools can develop policies and practices to help teachers identify students with special needs, collect information about educational needs, take action to meet those needs within the regular classroom and monitor and review student progress.

An audit of current provision of student support needs to be conducted before new policy is developed. It is also good practice to annually monitor whether student needs are being met.

## **2 Providing ongoing and relevant professional development**

Ongoing professional development of staff is a vitally important aspect of student welfare/support policy, programs and procedures in each school. All staff need to be skilled in understanding and implementing the four levels of activity outlined in the *Framework* in order to provide student support in their daily work. Some schools may need to make professional development in this area a charter priority.

Caring implies competence. When we genuinely care, we want to do our very best to effect worthwhile results for the recipients of our care. This means that caring is much more than an attitude, much more than a warm cuddly feeling ... It is an orientation of deep concern that carries us out of ourselves and into the lives, despairs, hopes and struggles of others. To care is to respond, and to respond responsibly we must continually strive for increased competence.

Noddings, L. in Beck, L., 1994

## **3 Providing a curriculum approach to student support via CSF Key Learning Areas and an integrated curriculum**

Key Learning Areas such as English, Studies of Society and the Environment, the Arts and Health and Physical Education include strands which are closely linked to student support. These areas are particularly suitable for integrated curriculum approaches.

## **4 Working collaboratively with members of the school and local community**

It is one thing to identify risk and protective factors in school communities and quite another to successfully implement and sustain a program of change. Program commitment is enhanced if key school staff, students, parents, school support staff and relevant members of the community work together from the planning stage onwards. For a clear understanding of the change process, refer to *The Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools: Support Materials*.

## **5 Implementing models of student support**

Schools have their own specific management structure for student support; the significance and range of the models will reflect the priority the school places on student support.

Allocation of student welfare role and responsibility may include:

- appointment of a designated Student Welfare Coordinator, with a time allowance for the role
- designation of an identified School Welfare Leadership position or team
- incorporation of this area as part of an Assistant Principal's defined duties
- nomination of Area Leaders with welfare responsibility in their own areas
- formation of a Student Welfare Committee with representation from various areas of the school
- development of a School Environment Committee or Welfare Project Team
- development of a Whole College Approach to Welfare and Discipline Committee
- school network or cluster arrangements that may involve multi-campus collaborative provision, across a number of primary or secondary schools or K/P–12
- inclusion of student welfare as a formal item on the agenda of every staff meeting, leadership meeting and/or School Council meeting.

## **6 Linking to regional Student Support Services and community support services**

Student Support Services are of valuable assistance to schools in planning and providing support to students, their families and teachers at all levels of Framework activity. It is crucial that schools develop and communicate procedures for linking to these services as part of their whole-school approach to student welfare and support. The *School Focused Youth Services* initiative is a significant resource for schools to assist in the development of such links.

When referring to Student Support Services, teachers need to follow their school's process and protocols which will also assist them to:

- draw on the range of specific expertise available from student support service officers in their cluster
- provide appropriate documentation of specific concerns, relevant information and observations
- communicate which strategies have been previously attempted to address a student's difficulties.

All schools should be aware of the wide range of federal, state and local government and non-government agencies in their own area and develop links with these agencies to support students. Many local governments provide a database of such agencies in their area. These links with outside DoE agencies are very important as many provide support in out-of-school hours. Department of Human Services agencies are also an important community service and support.

## **7 Evaluating the provision of student support**

It is crucial that schools demonstrate that the programs and procedures they have in place to support students reflect the ideals documented in school policies. Regular monitoring of various aspects of student support is necessary for the programs and strategies to meet student needs.

It is important to document a Whole-School Student Support Framework relating to the four levels of activity with policy, role description of Student Support Coordinator, structures, curriculum content, documentation proformas and accountability strategies clearly detailed. There should be an emphasis on primary prevention and early intervention for schools.

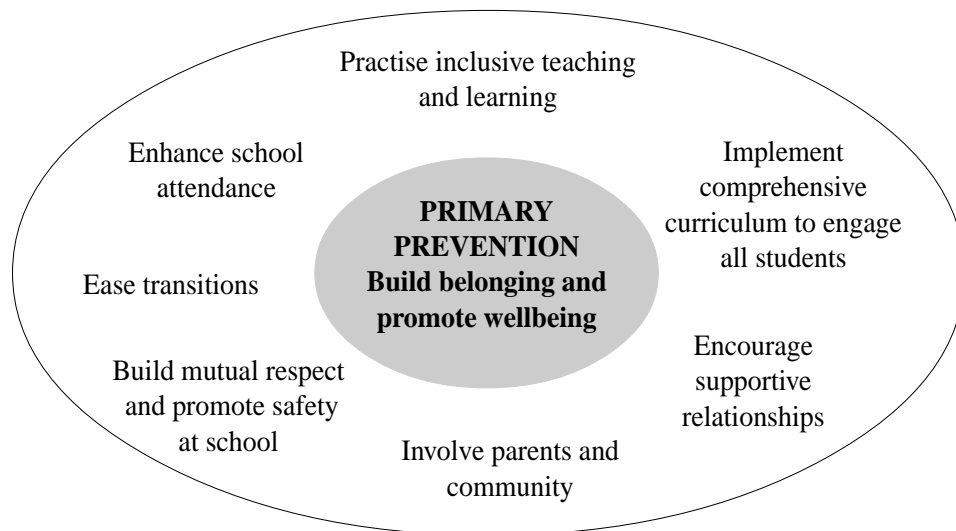
### **ACCESS TO SAMPLE SCHOOL POLICIES AND PROTOCOLS**

Many schools already have in place exemplary whole-school policies, programs and protocols for student welfare/support. Schools can network within their clusters and attend professional development activities to gain wider knowledge of policy and practice models. However, it is important that each school's policy and practices reflect the needs and characteristics of their own school.

# THE FOUR LEVELS OF ACTIVITY

## 1 PRIMARY PREVENTION

### BUILD BELONGING AND PROMOTE WELLBEING



The impact and experience of school on the social and emotional life of children is significant. No other human institution, outside the family, plays such an important role in shaping a child's view of the world.

Dr J. Wragg

### DEFINITIONS

#### Primary Prevention

- **aims to raise awareness of what makes students resilient, and to develop strategies to reduce vulnerabilities and increase coping skills**
- **refers to strategies for whole groups, such as a school or year level**
- **accounts for the coexistence of risk factors such as substance abuse, family conflict, homelessness, abuse and neglect and a range of emotional disorders.**

Primary prevention strategies are designed to enhance the emotional and social health of all students. Efforts are directed at promoting strengths, wellbeing and positive developmental outcomes.

Primary prevention can also involve skilling teachers in a range of approaches to develop the resilience of students throughout their school years.

Primary prevention is an inclusive approach that engages with young people and acknowledges their rights and responsibilities to influence their social, emotional and institutional environment.

Students of different ages have different social, emotional, physical and intellectual needs. Consequently, while some primary prevention activities apply to the whole-school population, others focus on the needs of specific age groups.

## Resilience

Encouraging resilience is a teaching and learning strategy. Many strategies developed for primary prevention and the other three levels of activity seek to build resilience, which refers to the capacity to cope with extreme and stressful life situations.

Resilience has been described as ‘the ability to bungy jump through the pitfalls of life. Even when hardship and adversity arise, it is as if the person has an elasticised rope around them that helps them to rebound when things get low, and to maintain their shape as a person.’

Fuller, A., 1998

Research indicates that certain social experiences and arrangements foster resilience in children and young people; others reduce resilience.

There are several protective factors that enhance resilience:

### **1 A sense of belonging at school.**

The support given to students by teachers can make a crucial difference to the lives of students. Factors that place young people at risk of harm, alienation and acting-out behaviours can be moderated if students feel they fit in at school and feel a sense of attachment or connection to their school.

School is like a second home ... like, you spend more of your waking time at school, you see more of your teachers than you see of your parents, you should see it like that, a second home.

Fuller et al, 1998

Obviously the earlier you give young people a place to belong the better. The pay-offs in terms of reduced behavioural problems, delinquency, lower teen pregnancy and substance abuse rates and lower suicide rates are enormous.

Fuller, A., 1998

### **2 A relationship with at least one competent, caring adult.**

A caring adult, whether parent, other family member, friend or teacher can form bonds with children and young people that help protect them from harm.

The most frequently encountered positive role model in the lives of resilient children outside the family circle, was a favourite teacher who was not just an instructor for academic skills for the youngsters, but also a confident and positive role model for personal identification.

Werner & Smith, 1992

The people to whom children are bonded need to have clear, positive standards for behaviour. They also need to show that they believe in the children ... Children who are bonded to others with healthy beliefs are less likely to do things that threaten that bond, such as misuse drugs, drop out of school or commit crimes.

Based on Hawkins and Catalano, 1993

### **3 Positive social behaviours and problem-solving skills.**

Effective coping, social and problem-solving skills help children and young people cope with stress and adversity. The risk of depression in eight-to twelve-year-olds is lessened when children have these skills.

There is a clear link between effective interpersonal problem-solving and later adjustment. Interpersonal problem-solving is an approach that tries to teach young people how to think rather than what to think. It attempts to develop within the young person the skills of developing multiple solutions to problems, foreseeing the outcomes of actions and linking the ends with the means.

Fuller, A., 1998

### **4 A sense of spiritual and communal belonging.**

A sense of attachment to a community, religion, culture, organisation or cause can help young people to feel a sense of belonging or meaning in their lives; that there is more to the world than material comfort and good fortune.

Young people who are establishing their identities, values and beliefs need a clear set of reference points to help them make sense of life and their place in the world.

Based on Eckersley, R., 1992

All manner of stories - fairytales, folk tales, personal stories, etc - help listeners to explore sensitive issues in a safe, non-threatening way, provide appropriate models for behaviour, and remind young people that they are not alone in their struggles and their pain.

Fredericks, L., 1997

### **5 Strong family relationships and minimal family stress.**

Strong family bonds are protective for children and young people. Families in conflict, experiencing social, health or management problems, need support to help them provide the critical sense of love and belonging that all children and young people need.

For families to create environments characterised by the qualities of caring, high expectations and opportunities for participation (key building blocks of resilience), they in turn must exist in communities which also provide support and opportunities

Bernard, 1995



## 6 Peer connectedness.

Recent research in Victoria has demonstrated that students rate a sense of belonging to a friendship group as a high priority in their lives. This indicates that a positive connection to a peer group may be an important protective factor for many students.

### The school's role in strengthening protective factors

Schools are the most important site outside the home where young people learn about relating to others and coping with life situations. Schools can make a significant contribution to enhancing the resilience of children and young people by developing flexible curriculum programs to strengthen protective factors. Schools can also engage with the broader community to help ensure that young people have a meaningful role within that community.

## STRATEGIES

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**Schools can establish a supportive environment where a sense of belonging and wellbeing are strengthened when they:**

- 1 build mutual respect and promote safety at school**
- 2 implement comprehensive curriculum to engage all students**
- 3 enhance school attendance**
- 4 practise inclusive teaching and learning**
- 5 encourage supportive relationships**
- 6 involve parents/families and community**
- 7 ease transitions.**

### 1 BUILD MUTUAL RESPECT AND PROMOTE SAFETY AT SCHOOL

Every school needs 'a schoolwide commitment to respectful behaviour. This (involves developing) behaviour that promotes everyone's integrity, safety and wellbeing. Respectful behaviour is marked by the acknowledging and valuing of racial, gender, age and other differences; the practice of listening to others; the willingness to make and honour agreements for mutual respect; and the ability to solve problems and make decisions cooperatively'.

Cantor et al, 1997

In an environment of mutual respect, schools should develop, maintain and communicate policies, procedures and programs to promote a harassment-free environment for teaching and learning.

Surveys of students and their parents are a valuable means of finding out the level of concern and the specific safety issues affecting students. As students continue to see bullying at school as one of their key concerns, it is crucial that relevant policies and procedures are developed and communicated to all members of the school community. These policies should empower students and play an enhancing role in the development of coping skills.

## Peer mediation programs

Peer mediation programs are being successfully implemented in many primary and secondary schools. Students are trained to help others solve minor disagreements. These programs promote mutual respect and help to overcome violence, both physical and verbal. A by-product of the program is that parents of trained peer mediators have noticed improved parent - child relationships at home.

## 2 IMPLEMENT COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM TO ENGAGE ALL STUDENTS

A comprehensive curriculum will incorporate the personal and social issues of students into their daily learning experiences in a way that reflects each stage of their development.

**Schools need to be aware of concerns about school-based curriculum programs designed to convey specific information on suicide prevention and awareness for students.**

The *Suicide Prevention Victorian Task Force Report* states:

There are many contributing factors to suicidal ideation and behaviour, and the Task Force does not believe suicide specific curriculum should be built into the programs of schools. Rather, the curriculum should provide opportunities for students to develop strong communication and problem-solving skills, and more practical training in how to access professional and medical services. This should be done through networking with other professionals in the local community, and through developing a health-promoting framework for appropriate parts of the curriculum.

## 3 ENHANCE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Regular school attendance is one of the major factors contributing to a student's wellbeing and success. The DoE document, *Student Attendance Guidelines, 1997* can assist schools to address attendance issues.

Fitting in at school is rated as very important by young people. Victorian students see that school is important as a place of learning, where adults outside the family are accessible and where you can belong to a social group. Regular attendance is critical to participation in these key activities.

Fuller et al, 1998

All teachers need to:

- monitor individual student attendance consistently
- alert the school administration promptly when concerned about student attendance
- liaise closely with parents and guardians regarding enhancement of student attendance.

Consistency and time frame are critical factors when responding to matters relating to school attendance. The longer poor attendance habits are given to

develop, the more difficult they become to change. Many schools have recognised this factor and require parents to contact school on the day their child is absent. If an explanation is not received on the day of absence, the school will contact the parents. Furthermore, if some staff are vigilant about attendance, while others have different priorities, students soon learn where the system 'leaks' and it gradually sinks.

#### 4 PRACTISE INCLUSIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

The provision of flexible, relevant, inclusive and appropriate curriculum is fundamental to building the wellbeing and resilience of school students.

##### MONITORING AND ENHANCING TEACHING STYLE

Inclusive teaching and learning involves the ongoing monitoring and enhancing of teaching style.

An effective teacher places as much importance on how to teach, as on what to teach.

Three conditions have been identified as necessary to bring about bonding to a social unit such as a school or particular class. These are:

##### 1 Opportunities

Children must be provided with opportunities to contribute to their community, family, school and peers. The challenge is to provide meaningful opportunities that help young people feel significant. These may include active roles of responsibility in the classroom, school promotions, student politics, social service, school newspaper, computer monitor, inter-school debates, public speaking and inter-house activities.

##### 2 Skills

Children must be taught the skills necessary to take advantage of the opportunities provided. Self-awareness, communication, optimistic thinking, values clarification, assertiveness and goal setting are some of the skills that may be taught to students at school.

##### 3 Recognition

Children and young people must be recognised for their efforts. They can be recognised in a range of ways such as positive reinforcement by a teacher, school reports, written or verbal comments, encouragement to participate in class, acknowledgement in school publications, or at parent-teacher nights, in presentations and inter-school activities, participation in ritual events such as school balls, and more widely a school's general culture of support and acknowledgment.

These three conditions are standard practice for schools and teachers, but are worth monitoring to ensure that adequate provision is made for all students.

Based on Social Development Strategy: 1993, *Building Protective Factors in your Community*, Development Research Programs Inc.

## Social and coping skills

Social skills are probably the most important skills we can teach students because they affect every area of their life, both short-term and long-term. There is a very strong link between social difficulties and learning difficulties ... Many students achieve poorly because they are just plain unhappy and may engage in more sad and anxious thoughts which distract from their learning tasks.

Mc Grath, H., 1996

What social skills should be taught?

Helen McGrath points out that skills can be selected from a large range, according to the social needs of specific classrooms and students. Some of the more commonly chosen areas for skill development include:

- playing games well
- risk taking
- being interesting
- being positive
- cooperating
- showing empathy and helping others.

## RELATING TO THE DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Prevention programs that can be conducted within schools are best related to the developmental needs of children and young people.

Fuller, A., *From Surviving to Thriving*

The practice of inclusive teaching and learning involves consideration of and responses to the developmental needs of children and young people.

## The Early Years: Prep to Year 4

In the early years of schooling the key task is to help students move from the home to the culture of school and to balance both environments.

Children develop and learn at different rates and in different ways. They come from a number of different backgrounds. Learning must be meaningful to them all. This can be achieved through a child-centred or developmentally-based program that can respond to individual learning needs.

The learning needs of each student in the class provide direction for the structure and focus of programs. This is challenging for teachers because of the wide range of abilities within most classrooms.

Teachers need to:

- have detailed understandings of how children learn
- have well-developed classroom routines, structures, organisation and management related to the teaching of groups
- motivate and engage students while applying a range of classroom practices and strategies in response to the needs of students.

Based on Hill, P., & Crevola, C., 1998

To learn effectively, children need to interact, play and work within an environment which reflects security, trust and appropriate learning experiences. It follows that the environment, teaching practices and manner of all teaching staff must clearly reflect goals and expectations if each child is to feel secure and successful.

### Literacy

Research has demonstrated that acquiring literacy skills is the foundation for all learning. Children who fail to develop literacy competence by Year 3 often fall further behind as they progress through school.

Literacy is seen ... not just as a set of skills to be mastered but as mental functioning which actually structures and organises specifically literate ways of thinking. Because of this impact on thinking, literacy is seen as intimately bound up in success ... without literacy, progress in school becomes impossible.

Rabin-Bisby, cited in *Suicide Prevention Victorian Task Force Report*,  
July 1997

Achieving literacy skills, making academic progress and developing self-esteem are so intertwined that a major preventive focus in schools must always be on the learning needs of individual students.

### The Middle Years: Years 5 to 9

Although there are a number of models of middle schools, a unifying theme is a structure that makes schools more cohesive, less bureaucratic and impersonal and more like a collection of small communities.

*Suicide Prevention Victorian Task Force Report*, July 1997

Middle schooling describes a stage of schooling that bridges the traditional 'primary-secondary divide', where students at the critical pre- and early adolescent stage of development have often been dealt with quite differently by the two levels of the school system.

Over the past ten to fifteen years, extensive research and development on middle schooling has taken place in Australia. Effective middle schooling is underpinned by a set of common and agreed beliefs and principles. There is a recognition that young adolescents have particular physical, intellectual, cultural and social needs that are different from those of children and young adults.

In *Shaping Middle Schooling in Australia: A Report on the National Middle Schooling Project*, Robyn Barratt states that 'The middle years of schooling should provide opportunities for young people to learn and grow in ways that acknowledge and respect this unique phase of their development.'

Forums conducted across Australia during 1996–7 as part of the National Middle Schooling Project, concluded that if learning is to feel relevant to the lives of students in this stage of development it must be centred on their specific, identified needs, which include:

- identity
- relationships

- purpose
- empowerment
- success
- rigour
- safety.

**Some characteristics of effective middle schooling practices include:**

***Students***

- learn within an integrated curriculum framework
- negotiate a significant proportion of the learning and assessment tasks
- enjoy quality relationships within an organisation that ensures that each student is in contact with a small number of teachers.

***Teachers***

- work in teams
- share scheduled times for planning and professional development within and across the primary/secondary nexus
- facilitate inclusive programs and structures that address adolescent interests and concerns, especially health issues and affective development.

***School leaders***

- develop a learning community within a collaborative culture
- shift school focus from subject-centred to student-centred learning
- encourage broader community participation in the education of young adolescents.

Barratt, R., 1998

## The Senior Years: Years 10 – 12

At this stage school is no longer compulsory for students, but the importance of achieving a strong base for the future is the message communicated to most young people. Students in the senior years of schooling are at the point where decisions about future life options, including career paths, are pressing.

These issues can create anxiety for many students and a high degree of stress for some students. It is important to the self-esteem and general sense of wellbeing of students at this stage that they feel there is a variety of valid ways to contribute to society and to earn a living. This needs to be reflected within the curriculum and in the various ways whereby support is provided to students who are struggling with personal issues.

Within the VCE framework, there is flexibility for vocational emphasis within the curriculum. The Vocational Education and Training policy (1996) broadens the senior secondary curriculum to encompass vocational pathways.

## AFFIRMING DIVERSE STUDENT NEEDS AND BACKGROUNDS

Students differ widely in their abilities, cultural and language backgrounds, interests, experiences and preferred learning styles. This diversity needs to be acknowledged, valued and incorporated in all school programs and activities.

Opportunities to succeed are best provided when teachers:

- encourage students to understand themselves and others
- recognise the diversity among students and in relation to their family circumstances and cultural backgrounds
- acknowledge individuals' different learning styles and interests.

## 5 ENCOURAGE SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

### SUPPORTIVE PEER RELATIONSHIPS PROGRAMS

The development of sound peer relationships and a pro-social orientation to others is a significant task that needs to be accomplished by all children as they enter and progress through school.

Wragg Dr J., 1996

Victorian school students particularly value relationships with their peers and see them as an important source of support when they are having problems. A range of peer involvement programs and activities can constructively use this preference to build cooperation and a culture of caring at school.

Fuller et al, 1996

Peer programs can involve teaming older and younger students or same-year-level students to train them in social interaction and problem-solving skills.

Our peer support time let me see how much the little kids liked having us spend time with them. I guess we can do for them sort of what teachers can do for us, the age difference doesn't really matter then.

Fuller et al, 1996

Some secondary schools train Year 11 students as Peer Counsellors. They function beyond the classroom by being observant and actively participating in student matters — comforting, promoting 'cool discussions' and undertaking negotiation and conflict resolution.

Several schools use the notion of cooperative learning as an underlying principle in their approach to classroom management and teaching strategies. These are sometimes referred to as Small Table Teams or Peer Involvement Teams. Students are organised into teams and have a range of rights and responsibilities that come with being a member of that team. These rights and responsibilities relate to social skills as well as cooperative learning tasks.

### POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Effective teachers place great emphasis on communicating positively with their students. They provide continuous feedback to encourage student effort and are compassionate when students are experiencing difficulties.

Quality schoolwork (and the quality of the life that results from it) can only be achieved in a warm, supportive classroom environment. It cannot exist if there is an adversarial relationship between those who teach and those who learn. Not only need there be a strong, friendly feeling between teacher and students, this same feeling is necessary among students, teachers and administrators. Above all there must be trust: they must all believe that the others have their welfare in mind. Without this trust, neither students nor teachers will make the effort needed to do quality work. Because the ability to talk to others who listen is the foundation of warmth and trust, the students must be encouraged to talk honestly and easily to their teacher and he or she to them.

Glasser, W., 1993

Teachers also need to have fun with their students, to create opportunities to enjoy each other's company and get to know each other better.

### **Pastoral care structures**

Schools have a range of structures to support pastoral care for students. Home groups, sub-schools and house systems are examples of providing students with regular and ongoing access to teachers who know them well and care about them.

## **6 EASE TRANSITIONS**

According to Fuller, points of transition have long been recognised as critical moments in determining people's wellbeing. Shifting from one developmental stage to another can intensify vulnerability; anxiety can increase markedly and confidence decrease.

Students commonly experience transitions between schools at varying times in their academic careers:

- from home to pre-school
- between ages 4 and 7 from pre-school to primary school
- between ages 11 and 13 from primary school to secondary school
- at ages 15-17 for some students from junior secondary into senior secondary
- at ages 16-18 for students leaving secondary school to seek employment or to enter tertiary education.

Investigations involving school students suggest that students may be at risk of experiencing decreased self-esteem and sense of academic competence during periods of school transition and that these stages offer valuable opportunities for preventive programs and activities.

Chung, H., Elias, M., Schneider, K., 1998



## TRANSITION PROGRAMS

Most schools have developed transition programs for students between pre-school and school and between Years 6 and 7.

### Pre-school to primary school programs

Many primary schools now operate successful pre-school to prep grade transition programs in Term 4 for the following year. Pre-schoolers visit their intended school and participate in activities, meet current Prep grade students and staff and become familiar with aspects of school life. Prep grade teachers also often visit pre-schools to observe how the children interact with their peers.

### Primary to secondary school transition

School change can be a stressful event at this stage and ‘transition programs to ensure adequate integration into secondary school are vital. Studies have shown that successful integration programs will prevent later substance abuse and delinquency.’

Fuller, A., 1998

Features of successful Years 6 to 7 programs include:

- Year 6 students visiting, joining in activities and using resources at their intended secondary schools
- Year 6 students assembling folders of work, or ‘passports’, to show who they are and what they are good at to secondary school teachers
- an integrated studies program in Year 7 with fewer teachers for the students to get to know
- Year 7 home rooms, reducing the need to move for different classes
- skills training programs that focus on positive peer involvement, coping, seeking support and goal setting.

Movement between school campuses and between schools at different stages of schooling can also be difficult for some students. Schools need to know in advance important information concerning the students and to have planned processes that welcome all newcomers into a socially supportive school community.

## 7 INVOLVE PARENTS/FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY

### Meaningful parent/family involvement

It is crucial that schools continue to seek ways to develop positive, respectful and meaningful partnerships with the student’s parents or caregivers.

Teachers need to ... give recognition to the vital role parents play as co-educators of their children.

Briggs, F. & Potter, G., 1991

Home–school partnerships create opportunities for the development of shared understandings of learning. With this shared view, the student’s home and school experiences can be brought together to be built upon for further success

in learning. This is especially significant in supporting children's early literacy development.

Some parents are not able to carry out active roles at school. However, many schools develop home-school links in other ways; for example, through communication books. Special attention needs to be given to those students who do not enjoy a positive home-school partnership.

Essential features of parent/family participation include:

***Developing partnerships***

Schools need to provide a variety of opportunities to enable strong partnerships to be developed between home and school.

***Strategic planning***

The formation of a whole-school strategic plan is essential to provide a coordinated approach to parent participation. This plan would address such areas as variety of opportunities and appropriate resource allocation.

***Monitoring***

Ongoing monitoring of the plan will allow schools to track parent participation.

*Teaching Readers in the Early Years, 1997*

Many schools now designate a Leading Teacher position to enhance parent participation. Some schools have sections in weekly newsletters devoted to parents; for example, a Parent Corner with 'survival parenting strategies'.

## Parent involvement and education programs

School communities can help to involve and support families in a preventive sense by running parent education programs, often with appropriate agencies.

Most families believe caring for their children and adolescents is the central objective of their lives. Most young people want to maintain a strong relationship with their parents, no matter how difficult that is. Many parents seek knowledge about how to parent more effectively and improve their relationship with their children.

Suicide Prevention Victorian Task Force Report, July 1997

Many schools provide a range of parent involvement and education programs. Schools recognise family members as valuable resources in programs such as *Parents as Tutors* (for literacy) and *Towards Real Independence* (supporting their children's homework, not doing it). Grandparents and extended family members are also involved in the diverse range of programs in many schools.

Such initiatives convey that the school is an integral part of the local community and that it welcomes and values the involvement and expertise of students' families.

## Mentor programs

Mentor programs help to ensure that children and adolescents have a relationship with at least one competent and caring adult. It is important to

develop strategies that enable young people to receive the consistent support of an older mentor, particularly when such support is not available at home.

Considerations for mentor programs include:

- offering access to one-to-one mentors for students experiencing difficulties to help improve both their skills and sense of social connection
- providing students with a choice of mentors
- drawing on mentors from within the school, from parents or from the local community
- ensuring appropriate screening (including police checks), training and support for volunteers for mentor programs.

Apart from targeted mentoring programs, such as Big Brother, Big Sister, supportive inter-generational relationships will also develop through the normal functioning of a broad educational program.

## Partnerships between school and community

Young people with a meaningful connection to the broader community tend to be more resilient in the face of problems and stress. Schools can encourage both young people and local communities to engage with each other through a range of classroom or extracurricular programs. In many schools these activities have a long tradition, such as community members conducting programs, team sports, band membership and support to older citizens in their homes or retirement villages.

Some schools have taken this concept further and have developed school-community partnerships or models of cooperation. These provide a framework for schools and communities to engage on a range of levels and in a range of ways. Schools that enter in a spirit of commitment and good faith have found the benefits to be many and varied, not least being the effects on the wellbeing of young people.

Such partnerships include:

- schools and sporting clubs integrating sport and physical education, with teachers and sporting club personnel working together with teams of students. Students in these teams identify and develop a range of valued roles, responsibilities and skills, including leadership, cooperation and decision-making. Those who participate also gain a sense of belonging and enjoyment.
- agencies providing peer education training for students, who in turn provide supportive relationships for younger students. The relationships formed between agency workers and students in training also help to develop lines of communication and broader networks for young people in the community.

These school and community partnerships are never the same as each other. Differences are due to the differing needs of young people, the variety of resources available and the particular skills and motivations of the personnel who participate across diverse communities.

## GOOD PRACTICE

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Many Victorian government schools are involved in the *Health Promoting Schools* project which has a strong emphasis on the development and maintenance of partnerships between schools and parents/caregivers, community groups and health service providers. A Health Promoting School is a place where all members of the school community work together to provide students with integrated and positive experiences and structures which promote and protect their health (WHO, 1995).



Further information can be found at the following website address:  
<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/hps/>

The following case studies represent different approaches taken by schools that fit into the definitions and use some of the strategies outlined in the Primary Prevention level of activity.

### Laverton Primary School Pre-school Transition Program

Laverton Primary School runs a comprehensive transition program with a local kindergarten. Contacts with kindergarten teachers concerning the next school year begin in February and activities are organised throughout the year.

Shared activities between the participating kindergarten and the primary school include:

- visits to the kindergarten by primary school teachers
- staff attendance at district transition meetings
- Years 4–6 students instrumental music group performances at the kindergarten
- Years 2–6 students visits for shared reading with kindergarten children
- Education Week programs
- distribution of a Prep Information Booklet
- an Orientation program at the school
- Book Week
- primary school attendance at the kindergarten Open Day
- a kinder/school fun family barbecue at the school
- parent information sessions.

Laverton Primary School believes that this program helps pre-school children to feel an increased sense of belonging when they start school.

### Mount Erin Secondary College Transition Program

Mount Erin Secondary College has a highly successful transition program for students entering the school from a wide range of local primary schools. The school is involved in a Years 5–8 Network and is committed to making the learning process as ‘seamless’ as possible for students.

- transition managed by a Junior Sub School Director
- visits to each primary school early in Term 1 of the year preceding entry for discussions with principals and Year 6 staff
- parent tours and information evenings during Education Week and at other times in Term 2
- Year 7 student visits to their previous primary school to do short talks and answer questions
- 'Passports' distributed to each student who has selected Mount Erin SC
- Year 6 students invited to submit questions to be answered as part of the Orientation Day program
- Orientation Day with future Form Teacher and class
- special program with the Form Teacher for the first week of Year 7 focused on student 'passports'
- Pastoral Camp in week 2 at Phillip Island
- Pastoral Teacher stays with the class for 8–10 lessons per week, where possible
- Year 7 classes have a home room and remain in it for all possible classes
- students from the same primary school kept in groups where possible
- Year 10 Buddies allocated to each Year 7 class to work in a range of formal and informal ways (camp, excursions, form assembly, classes, lunch time)
- news on how the students have settled-in provided at the first Mount Erin Years 5–8 Network meeting of the year
- Network dinner held in mid Term 2
- transition process reviewed annually by the Mount Erin Years 5 - 8 Network and modified as appropriate.

Mount Erin says 'In general our secret to effective Years 6-7 transition is to listen carefully to our primary colleagues'.

### PROMOTING SCHOOL SUCCESS: Heatherhill Secondary College

A school community discussion about student issues and the effect they have on promoting school success was held at Heatherhill Secondary College in 1998. It aimed to:

- foster parent involvement
- provide access to information regarding adolescent issues
- provide opportunities for discussion and interaction
- highlight school programs
- highlight community resources

- gather information about parent and student concerns for future planning.

The agenda included presentation of issues within the school community and a description of programs and strategies to address these issues. A workshop format provided opportunities for parents and their children to raise concerns other than those presented and to interact with staff and representatives from community services. Interpreters were available for Vietnamese and Khmer families.

Parents agreed that the issues presented by school staff were important and well handled by the school. Further concerns for parents included truancy, drug issues, communication processes, stress management for students, homework and gaining greater access to community resources. Students said that they wanted more homework support programs, bullying to be addressed more effectively, more school counselling support, more of a voice in the school and more sport.

This forum provided valuable links between members of the school community as well as crucial information to help prioritise future action.

### Peer Mediation Program at Trafalgar High School

A peer mediation program was successfully implemented at Trafalgar High School in 1998. Staff undertook training conducted by the Conflict Resolution Network Schools Development program.

The school was issued with a set of student workbooks entitled *Implementing Peer Mediation* written by Christina McMahon. These booklets formed the basis of intensive training for VCE students interested in acting as mediators. Role-plays of potential conflict situations were central to this training, along with the establishment and reinforcement of recommended procedures to be followed during mediation interviews.

Student mediators were introduced at a school assembly, a mediation kit was placed in the Assistant Principal's office and a roster of pairs of mediators was made. Year Level Coordinators would ask students in conflict if they were willing to participate in peer mediation.

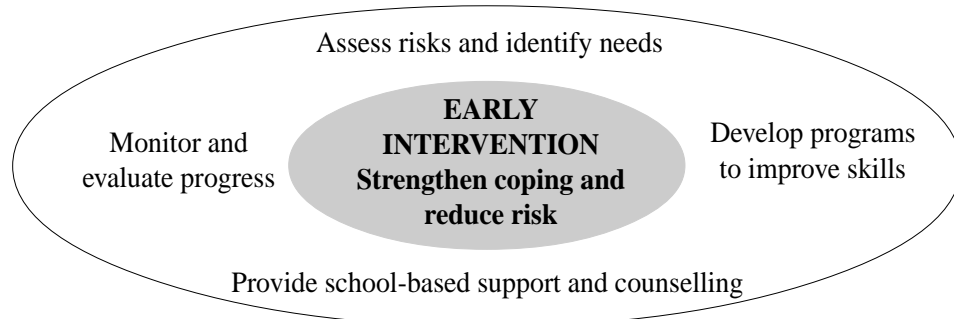
Peer mediation has been very successful as a means of resolving conflict, especially between junior secondary students, with positive feedback received from staff, parents and-most importantly-from the students themselves. It has also been a very valuable experience for the senior students who have filled the mediator role. Training of such students is intensive, however, meaning that staff involved need to be supported by the whole school community's commitment to such a program.

## 2 EARLY INTERVENTION

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### STRENGTHEN COPING AND REDUCE RISK

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Despite a strong focus on preventive activities, some students remain vulnerable to harm. They will need early intervention strategies not only to strengthen their coping, but also to protect their wellbeing.

For many resilient children, the helpers are far outside of the troubled families. They are teachers or pastors or community leaders who ... show or do something that supports the struggling child's hope and self-confidence ... More often than not, those surrogate helpers of resilient children-remembered over a lifetime-are found at school.

Young-Eisendrath, P., 1996

## DEFINITIONS

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### EARLY INTERVENTION

#### **Early intervention**

- targets those at risk of ongoing social, emotional and/or physical harm in order to reduce the intensity, severity and duration of the risk behaviour
- minimises potential harm by improvements in identifying, assessing and managing students at risk.

Early intervention is focused on groups that are at higher risk of harm and aims to improve their resilience through effective and appropriate support programs and treatment. Strategies are targeted at students displaying inappropriate choice of coping skills, stress reactions, depressive symptoms, and other personal and social vulnerabilities. Research has shown that there are a number of risk factors that increase the chances of adolescents developing health and behaviour problems. Schools need to be aware of the risk factors, while increasing protection throughout the course of young people's development.

Students who have a number of risk factors operating in their lives are a particular focus of early intervention programs. Their multiple needs mean these individuals are especially vulnerable when service systems are poorly integrated and uncoordinated. Improved cross-sectoral approaches are an important goal in early intervention.

The longer the problem persists, the harder it is to change.

Wragg., Dr J., 1996

## Risk and resilience factors

<b>Level</b>	<b>Risk factors</b>	<b>Protective factors</b>
<b>Community level</b>		
	Availability of drugs	
	Media portrayals of violence	Cultures of cooperation
	Transitions and mobility	Stability and connection
	Low neighbourhood attachment and community disorganisation	Good relationship with an adult outside the family
	Poverty	
<b>School culture and ethos</b>		
	Detachment from school	A sense of belonging
	Academic failure, especially in middle years	Positive achievements and evaluations at school
	Early and persistent antisocial behaviour	Having someone who believes in you
	Low parental interest in education	Attendance at pre-school education
<b>Family</b>		
	Family history of problem alcohol or drug usage	A sense of belonging or connectedness to family
	Inappropriate family management	Family valued traits
	Family conflict	Proactive problem solving and minimal conflict during infancy
	Alcohol/drugs interfere with family rituals and celebrations	Maintenance of family rituals
	Harsh/coercive and/or inconsistent parenting	Warm relationship with one parent
	Marital instability or conflict	Absence of divorce during adolescence
	Favourable parental attitudes toward risk taking behaviours	A good fit between parent and child
<b>Individual/peer</b>		
	Constitutional factors, alienation/rebelliousness, hyperactivity	Temperament/activity level, social responsivity, autonomy
	Seeing peers taking drugs	
	Friends who engage in problem behaviour	Developed a special gift, curiosity and zest for life
	Favourable attitudes toward problem behaviour	Work success during adolescence
	Early initiation of the problem behaviour	High intelligence, not when paired with sensitive temperament

Adapted from Fuller A., *From Surviving to Thriving*, 1998, ACER, Melbourne. Reproduced with the permission of the Australian Council for Educational Research.



# STRATEGIES

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If early intervention is to assist students effectively, schools will need to:

- 1 assess risks and identify needs
- 2 provide school-based counselling and support as required
- 3 develop programs to improve skills
- 4 monitor and evaluate student support programs.

## 1 ASSESS RISKS AND IDENTIFY NEEDS

It is important that clear referral systems are developed for school staff to help clarify emerging difficulties and to link students with appropriate support before problems become too entrenched.

### Provide professional development for teacher

Schools can access Student Support Services staff or community agency staff to help develop an awareness and understanding of indicators of risk. Student welfare training for staff may also be provided on a cluster basis.

### Know and understand your students

Teachers are in a unique position to notice how their students are functioning. They have a vital role in the early assessment of risks to which students are exposed and identification of their students' needs.

Teachers as individuals, in year-level groups and in conjunction with school leadership teams can develop, implement and evaluate a range of strategies to find out more about their students and their needs. One example is the use of surveys concerning student perceptions of their health and wellbeing and their sense of safety at school.

### Screening of Prep students

All primary schools are required to administer a screening test to all new Prep students. This assessment will help to identify student strengths and weaknesses for future programming.

### Note changes

Teachers need to have basic information about their students in order to note significant changes in their physical, social or emotional health. Indicators suggesting risk include changes in:

- school attendance-at school and in class
- physical capacities such as hearing, vision
- physical appearance and health
- academic performance
- behaviour patterns such as withdrawal, anger
- relationships-family, peer, teachers.

## Monitor school attendance

Noticing whether students are attending regularly or are absent without good reason is a basic responsibility for all teachers. Schools need to be aware that poor school attendance can have a range of causes and a totally punitive approach is often inadequate.

Appropriate supportive responses to poor school attendance may include:

- an assessment
- counselling
- staged intervention
- positive communication with parents to highlight the importance of consistent attendance
- ongoing monitoring and support.

... school welfare policies and practices should be strengthened, and include more rigorous monitoring of student attendance and welfare. ... non-attendance, particularly school refusal, may be an early sign of depression or the onset of psychiatric illness, and specific strategies are required to assist young people with ongoing attendance problems.

*Suicide Prevention Victorian Task Force Report, July 1997*

A distinction also needs to be made between different types of non-attendance, including school refusal. A young person who habitually stays at home with a parent requires a different response from a student who is skipping school without their parent's compliance. The latter becomes increasingly difficult to counter the longer it goes unchallenged and increases vulnerability to other antisocial behaviours like petty crime and drug misuse.

School refusal is a different issue from truancy and generally requires the advice or intervention of a social worker or psychologist.

## Monitor academic performance

All teachers regularly monitor academic performance as they document student progress in the Key Learning Areas. Sudden and/or major changes in class involvement and achievement may indicate a need for student support.

## Monitor behaviour patterns

Teachers are accustomed to noticing the nature and level of their students' class participation and social interaction. Changes in behaviour, such as aggression, non-compliance, attention-seeking or withdrawal indicate the student needs support; or example, consultation with student welfare or management staff.

## ***Recognising depression***

Depression (is) emerging at a younger age among today's youth ... being born in the last decades of this century is a significant risk factor. Depression in children (is) likely to lead to behavioural problems. It often extends into adolescence, expressing itself in anti-social behaviour such as drug abuse and delinquency ... Childhood depression (is) too often not detected. It doesn't stand out quite so obviously as it does in adults. The symptoms are different.

Dr Bret Hart in *The Age* 14May 1998

Depression is more common in adolescents who:

- have a family history of depression
- are anxious
- are unable to establish positive social relationships
- have a conduct disorder
- misuse drugs
- have concerns about their sexuality
- suffer negative life events such as domestic disharmony or physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

Moreover, certain circumstances and experiences associated with loss, deprivation or disadvantage (such as being homeless, being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, being an immigrant refugee or being in custody) may make adolescents susceptible to depression.

### Considerations regarding risk assessment

Teachers can develop knowledge and skills to help them recognise a range of behaviours or situations that indicate students are vulnerable to harm such as suicide. While risk factors are valuable, they can only be a guide. There are young people without any of these risk factors who attempt and commit suicide each year. We therefore need to be conscious of the stresses on all students.

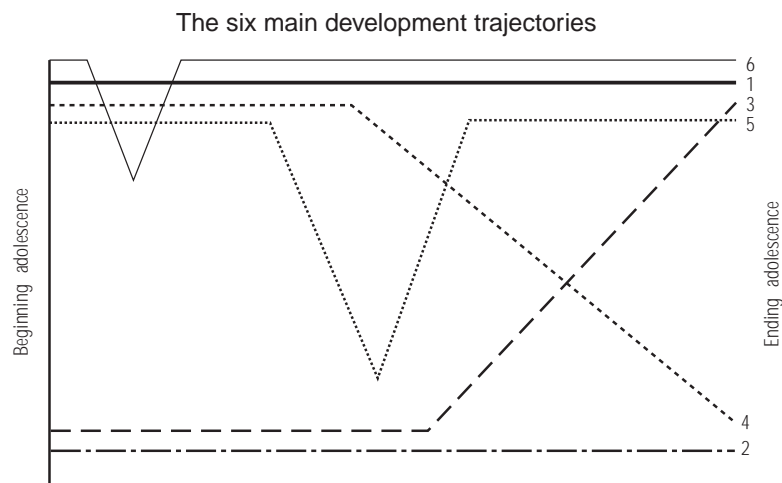
### Life Trajectories of Adolescents

Another way of viewing risk-taking behaviours is as a part of the developmental process. Life trajectory research provides a useful basis for considering risk taking as it considers the functioning of young people across the years from puberty to 25 years of age. Research and clinical experience suggest six main developmental trajectories:

1. **Stable adaptive functioning** — characterises young people who go through adolescence with a minimum of concerns. As with all teenagers, they will worry about getting a date, having too many pimples and not enough freedom, but basically they are supported in relatively low-risk environments. Most young people like their families, get on well with their parents for most of the time and maintain a positive sense of self (Harter, 1990).
2. **Stable maladaptive functioning** — those who enter adolescence with a history throughout their childhood of problems or disorder. These young people have often grown up in dysfunctional families in the presence of substance abuse, violence or, in some cases, parental psychopathology. Multiple agencies are often already involved in the life of the young person and their family. In some cases, family members will have to be more involved in their relationships with the counsellors supporting the family than with each other. For some of these children and young people, a stable, ongoing foster placement outside the home may be desirable. Others will simply require substantial support in order to grow up in their current circumstances. In some situations, these young people can switch to the next trajectory and develop more adaptive lifestyles.

- 3 **Adolescent turnaround or recovery** — life events and opportunities can contribute to an upturn in functioning (Rutter & Rutter, 1993; Elder, 1986, cited in Compas, Hinden & Gerhardt, 1995). Some young people in harsh circumstances as they grow, develop and gain autonomy are able link up with a more adaptive adult. Some decide to move in with a relative who is more able to support them. Others speak of a particular teacher, worker or counsellor who was able to inspire and support them — someone who believed in them.
- 4 **Adolescent decline** — this is a group of young people who, as they reach their mid-adolescence, begin a decline which often involves depression, aggression, and substance abuse late in the adolescent years. These young people congregate with a more and more troubled group of young people as their only way of experiencing social regard and success. Their belief in their inability to fit in and have some sense of personal success leads them to behave in ways that invoke responses in others which confirm this position of despair.
5. **Mid adolescent dip** — this trajectory is notorious in schools as a Year 8 or 9 phenomenon. This is a subgroup of young people who engage in aggressive or delinquent behaviours that is not preceded by problems and is not followed by antisocial behaviours. The great fear expressed often is that these young people will go on to take up lives of criminal behaviour or drug addiction. Experimentation with risk taking is common with this group and may be a way of expressing autonomy. Generally these young people do not adopt a broader deviant lifestyle.
6. **Puberty troubles** - around the onset of puberty is a time of lowered functioning for many young people as hormones, body growth, increased irritability and mood swings can dominate their relationships during that time.

Fuller, A., 1998, from *Surviving to Thriving*



From Fuller, A., 1998, *From Surviving to Thriving*

### Document your observations and concerns

Teachers may decide or be asked to keep brief notes concerning behaviour patterns, to enable consultation with colleagues, parents and support staff about student progress. Regular recording of significant and factual information based

on observation of a student's behaviour and performance at school is critical to the early identification of potentially serious problems.

Such information may be held in assessment and reporting folders or computer files. It is crucial that schools have a clear and documented process for communication and storage of confidential records associated with student support issues.

### Communicate your concerns

Schools need to establish and communicate a clear process for consultation and referral for teacher concerns about students. Regular, scheduled opportunities for year level or home group teachers to share concerns facilitate early identification of student difficulties.

Schools vary in terms of organisation and structures for student support. In each school, line management procedures, including roles and responsibilities, should be known, supported, and followed by all teachers. Confidentiality is an important aspect of this process; guidelines are provided on page 38.

The school administration needs to be aware of potentially serious student support problems as the principal carries the ultimate 'duty of care' in a school. If teachers work as 'lone agents', they risk finding situations unmanageable and leaving themselves open to challenge from parents, colleagues and others who carry responsibility for the student.

## 2 PROVIDE SCHOOL-BASED COUNSELLING AND SUPPORT

When school policy and practice clearly articulate and support pastoral roles and responsibilities for all staff, it is more likely that student distress will be recognised and acted upon early.

### Supportive teacher-student relationships

A supportive teacher can be 'somebody to be there who knows the name, knows the stories attached to the face and knows why it is'.

Bullen Father A

Given that students spend almost as much time at school as they do at home, and recognising that for those in the 10–15 age group there are very few easily accessible services, school-based counselling is vitally important for the health and welfare of students. Schools need to provide school-based helping processes where students are assisted to clarify their concerns and to access further specialist support as needed.

Every student in a school needs at least one teacher they can speak to comfortably. However this teacher does not necessarily have to be a class teacher.

Asking for a volunteer staff member who is prepared to connect with a marginalised student on a positive basis for a short time (even 10 minutes per week) can be a timely way to boost resilience. This staff member should not be involved in disciplinary action with that student.

Fuller, A., 1998

Student Support Services staff can offer joint or cooperative approaches to school-based counselling as well as consultation to designated student welfare staff or other teachers when these teachers are supporting students and their families.

It is good practice for school-based Student Welfare Coordinators to regularly debrief about student support issues when they have access to visiting student support staff. Such professional dialogue should be conducted with due regard to confidentiality guidelines for teachers and could be a valuable means of analysing problems and determining when further steps should be taken.

#### Student perceptions of school-based counselling

Students frequently call upon teachers as an early reference point for discussing their personal problems. In these situations, some teachers may be able to draw on formal counselling qualifications, others will draw on the skills they have developed through their long-term experience with young people. Whatever the situation students find some styles of communication more useful and more helpful than others.

‘Don’t tell us, talk to us and listen to us.’

Fuller, A., et al, 1998

However a recent Kids Help Line study indicated that students found school counselling helpful under certain conditions.

#### **School counselling is helpful when the teacher or counsellor:**

- takes time to explain their role and what confidentiality they can offer
  - \* importantly, those students who had confidentiality explained to them had a significantly higher level of satisfaction with the counselling session whatever the outcome
  - \* those who received no explanation expressed significantly lower levels of satisfaction
- is a good listener and easy to talk to
- shows respect and treats the student as an equal
- gives appropriate information
- takes further action
- has the ability to explore the student’s world.

From *School Counselling – a client centred perspective*, Kids Help Line, 1996

The school climate was also shown to play an important role in both students’ perceptions of school-based counselling and the counsellor’s ability to deliver a quality service. In schools where counselling was valued and undertaken with enthusiasm and innovation, students reported favourably on interaction and outcomes. However, the above study found that inadequate support of the counsellor’s role in other schools had led to negative experiences including students having to discuss sensitive issues in public areas such as the library, administration centre or staff room.

## Confidentiality and the teacher - student relationship

Confidentiality is an issue that causes stress for teachers and students. The following are some guidelines:

- students have a right to privacy, but a teacher cannot always guarantee confidentiality
- from the beginning a teacher should advise a student of the limits of the help and confidentiality they can provide, and that the teacher or student may need to seek help elsewhere
- the student should be informed prior to the teacher seeking further advice
- trauma associated with breaking confidentiality should be minimised, and will to a great extent depend on the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the student
- only communicate (to others, about the student) what is necessary and relevant

Department of Education, 1997, *Get Real: a Harm Minimisation Approach to Drug Education for Primary and Secondary Schools*

## Supportive communication with parents and families

Parents need to feel valued and encouraged when communicating with the school about their child's problems. They need to be told the positives or good news about their child. This will help them to keep a constructive problem-solving focus and believe that teachers see them as welcome partners in working through strategies for improvement.

An 'open door' policy by the school principal will often ensure easier communication to deal with a perceived problem before it worsens.

## Liaison with student support services and community agencies

Schools frequently use Student Support Services Officers as well as local community services staff. It is important for teachers to know and use the correct protocols and procedures for referring students and their families to these services.

Referrals can involve:

- assessment of psycho-social functioning, including levels of student self-esteem, social isolation, drug misuse, depression or suicidal tendencies.
- consultancy re early intervention strategies, including developing, running, monitoring and evaluating targeted programs
- joint planning and delivery of professional development programs.

### 3 DEVELOP PROGRAMS TO IMPROVE SKILLS

#### Developing skills for students

##### **Targeted school-based program initiatives**

Schools implement programs and activities designed to foster a wide range of skills — improving self-esteem, increasing assertiveness, managing anger and coping with loss and grief. These strategies are often developed and presented in conjunction with local Student Support Services staff. Schools can also develop flexible options for schooling; for example, partial work/partial school programs.

Improving literacy is a key area to target. Even with the best classroom teaching, a significant proportion of students fail to make satisfactory progress. For such students, early intervention strategies, such as *Reading Recovery*, *Bridging the Gap* and *Making a Difference* are essential to enable them to catch up quickly to their peers.

#### Developing skills for teachers

Schools need to provide staff with a variety of professional development opportunities to further enhance their student support skills. As teachers are often the first points of contact for young people experiencing emotional distress, the ability to recognise signs of distress and respond appropriately is essential.

##### **Further enhancement of skills can result in teachers:**

- developing a caring climate and clear procedures to ensure that students will feel comfortable in discussing their concerns with teachers and with counsellors
- clearly communicating to students how to get the support they need as well as explaining the teacher's role and what they can and cannot take on when discussing students' personal issues
- knowing how to respond appropriately to student concerns
- knowing how to raise sensitive issues with parents and how to handle conflicts between students and parents concerning their difficulties
- determining an appropriate level of involvement with students and their families
- knowing how to communicate with colleagues about particular students, especially when their colleagues have negative attitudes
- knowing their professional obligations and accountability requirements, for instance regarding legal issues such as the mandatory reporting of child abuse.

<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/standco/>



#### Developing skills for parents/caregivers

Many schools, often in partnership with local support services staff, offer parent support group programs as part of a strategic approach to early intervention with 'at risk' students. An anger management program for a group of students may be accompanied by a program for their parents, focusing on such issues as improving family communication.



## 4 MONITOR AND EVALUATE STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAMS

It is crucial that teachers continually measure the effectiveness of student support programs and activities. A number of schools have regular meetings with staff involved in the school's student support processes where student progress can be discussed and checked against predetermined goals.

Minor or major changes in focus or direction may be needed before the student can make significant progress. Schools can effectively develop and use proformas to monitor and evaluate progress for individuals and groups.

### GOOD PRACTICE

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These school-based case studies exemplify ways that schools can meet some of the aims in the Early Intervention level of activity.

#### LA TROBE SCHOOL WELFARE NETWORK (GIPPSLAND REGION)

##### **Background**

In early 1998, the District Welfare Working Party met to discuss the allocation of funds arising from the state government's response to the issue of youth suicide. A Steering Committee was formed to guide the process of forming a school welfare network.

##### **Aims**

- ensure that welfare-related services reach all the students in the district in a fair and equal way
- promote student welfare as a visible, significant function in each school in the district
- support the student welfare role in each school from a district level so that it is seen as an integral part of all areas of a successful school.

##### **Function**

- provide two days per year in-school-time training for a representative from each school
- fund CRT coverage for each school
- provide .2 time release for a teacher to coordinate the network
- design training around the needs of the area in consultation with a planning group.

##### **Approach**

- maintain organisation from a district level
- public launch of the project
- training days have included an expo of service providers
- training themes established for each year (e.g. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, emergency response in school and community, mandatory reporting of child abuse and linking with outside agencies).

## PARENT SUPPORT PROGRAM

Golden Square Secondary College has organised meetings of small groups of parents with similar concerns about their children. These groups, convened by two facilitators, met for six two-hour weekly sessions with aims that included:

- increasing the parents' understanding of adolescence
- changing the negative focus of the parents
- enabling the children to see their parents as taking steps to improve relationships
- providing the parents with practical skills-allowing the dynamics to change
- improving parent confidence and communication with the school
- breaking down parent isolation and providing supportive, safe networks for sharing problems.

Included among the skills targeted were:

- communication
- conflict resolution
- confidence in one's ability to parent (e.g. in laying down boundaries)

The program was highly regarded by all participants.

## SPRINGVALE SPORTS PROJECT: a Turning the Tide in Drug Education Connect Project

The Springvale Sports Project began in September 1997 at Springvale Secondary College and widened to other local secondary colleges and primary schools.

Members of the Springvale Drug Action Committee had observed that young people were perhaps most at risk of negative street activity such as crime and drug use in the period immediately after school. Young people lacked youth-oriented facilities. Sport was seen as part of a positive and practical way to engage these young people.

The Model

- **Consult with young people** regarding their sporting interest and involvement.
- **Target sporting clubs.** Find out whether they are funded to develop junior sports. Invite them onto your committee.
- **Kick off with a big event.** 'Come and Try' and 'Celebrity Sports Clinics' work well. A launch best gauges young people's interests for specific sports as well as highlighting which of the clubs are the most enthusiastic to be involved. It is also a great promotional tool.
- **The school site** is the best location to launch such a project because it is young people's 'turf' and parents feel that their children are safe there.

- **Clubs will provide sessions** perhaps after school, during lunchtimes or on weekends to familiarise young people with the sport.
- **Teachers' presence is essential** at these initial sessions in order to give legitimacy and safety in the eyes of parents. As an ongoing feature the maintenance of the project should be a small role for one staff member, including attendance at committee meetings, where the bulk of planning and liaison with clubs needs to occur.
- **Encourage parent involvement** to ensure sustainability of the program. Clubs will provide training to parents in coaching and they will also require support in transporting young people to and from clubs.
- **Eventually shift the program from the school to the sports club.** The school site is only the springboard from which to initiate contact between young people, their families and clubs.
- **Promote the positive and lifelong aspects of young people's involvement in sport.** This also attracts sponsors for equipment or other donations because everybody enjoys being part of something positive.
- **Maintain ongoing contact with a variety of local sports clubs** as sports are seasonal.

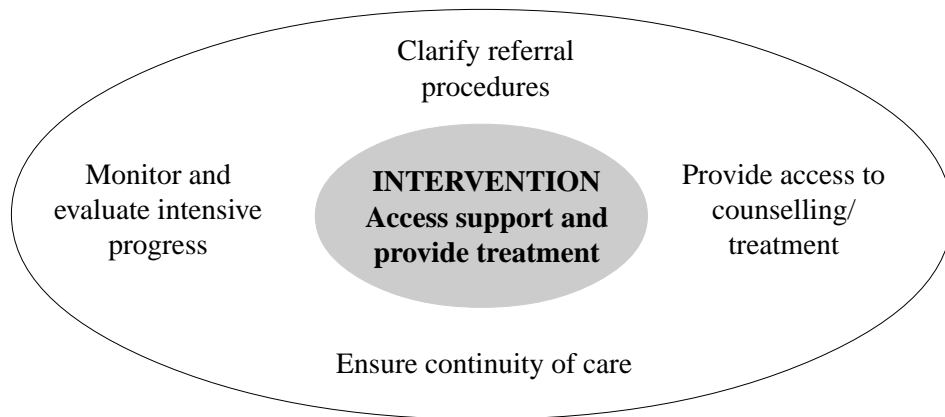
The initiative has successfully attracted NESB youth to local sporting organisations with which they had no former links. It has increased the self-esteem of many young people who have developed positive relationships with a wider cross-section of their community.

### 3 INTERVENTION

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#### ACCESS SUPPORT AND PROVIDE TREATMENT

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Responsive assistance for students in crisis or with chronic difficulties will need to involve 'new partnerships ... formed among parents, teachers, principals, health and social service providers, and school support professionals.' Community teams of 'caring adults' can also include 'elders, business representatives, university students and others.

Lawson, H. and Briar-Lawson, K., 1997, *Connecting the Dots*

#### DEFINITIONS

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##### INTERVENTION

- provides effective treatment and support to students in crisis
- ensures access to affordable and appropriate counselling, care and treatment services
- provides skills for those professionals dealing with students at crisis point.

#### Critical issues for student health and wellbeing

Students may encounter a range of difficulties needing intervention. Issues around mental health, family difficulties and breakdown, abuse and neglect, sexual identity, drug misuse and eating disorders may require short-term or ongoing support. In some cases this support may need to be provided by a specific therapeutic service.

#### **Early and persistent antisocial behaviour**

Students who display early and persistent antisocial behaviour, such as misbehaving in school, truanting and getting into fights with other children, are at increased risk for drug misuse, juvenile delinquency, violence, dropping out of school and teenage pregnancy (from Hawkins and Catalano p.7).

Collaborative intervention to improve such behaviour is a crucial area of work for schools, student support services and community services.

Child abuse and neglect

Teachers, at some time during their career, are highly likely to encounter situations in which children and young people are abused and neglected. Schools play an important role in supporting children and their families and need to be continually aware that teachers and principals have a mandated responsibility to report child abuse and neglect.

### **Decline in indicators of adolescent health**

Although ‘most young people successfully negotiate the transition from adolescence to become well-adjusted adults ... over the last 30 to 40 years we have witnessed a significant decline in the indicators of the wellbeing of young people.’

*Suicide Prevention Victorian Task Force Report, July 1997*

Communities are concerned about damage to the health and wellbeing of many young people from increased levels of:

- depression
- self-harm
- drug misuse
- family conflict
- eating disorders
- homelessness.

Concerted efforts by schools, in partnership with their communities, are needed to intervene when initial action to prevent or divert the development of these serious difficulties is not successful.

### **Unsafe behaviour**

Teachers must promptly make their principal aware of any instances where they believe a student’s safety is compromised. In some instances a teacher will not be able to leave the student in order to do so, and will have to tell someone else to take the message immediately to the principal. ‘Critical Incident Guidelines’ in *Get Real: A Harm Minimisation Approach to Drug Education for Primary and Secondary Schools* provide valuable advice for teachers concerning these situations.

Schools need policies and procedures for managing those emergencies that threaten the physical and/or psychological safety of students. Further advice is outlined in Level of Activity 4: Postvention, with particular reference to *Managing School Emergencies: Minimising the Impact of Trauma on Staff and Students*.

One of the most difficult crisis situations to manage effectively is being confronted with a suicidal young person. Should a student threaten suicide the following advice provided in Suicide Prevention Victorian Task Force Report, July 1997 is critical:

All suicide threats must be taken seriously. While contemplating suicide, an adolescent's perception of reality is often quite different from actual reality. If contact is made with a young person who is suspected of showing suicidal tendencies, it is essential to take rapid and appropriate action. Do not assume the situation will cure itself. It is far better to take action if the possibility of suicide exists, than to deal with the aftermath of a suicide. While caution is required, what you do between identifying the imminent risk and the arrival of professional help may save a life. During this time, you can assist the adolescent to feel less isolated and alone.

Suicide prevention is based on an approach of:

- Affirming the person: using whatever technique one feels comfortable with to make the adolescent feel valued and worthwhile
- Affirming the problem: recognising the adolescent's concerns about the problem and not denying the issues or their importance to the person
- Negating the solution: presenting the alternatives and facilitating different perspectives with the adolescent in such a way as to avoid lecturing or preaching.

Liaison with other key departments and organisations, such as the Department of Human Services and Victoria Police, is essential in providing access to a range of support services for young people and their families.

## STRATEGIES

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To ensure appropriate intervention when the necessity arises, schools will need to:

- 1 clarify referral procedures
- 2 link to counselling services
- 3 ensure continuity of care
- 4 monitor and evaluate progress.

### 1 CLARIFY REFERRAL PROCEDURES

The decision to refer a student for professional support or counselling requires a clear understanding of why the student requires additional help, which is the most appropriate professional or organisation to give that help, and what are the outcomes to be achieved. A plan (sometimes referred to as a case management plan) needs to be developed offering clarity, direction and consistency, including an articulation of roles and responsibilities. This will not only help everybody to work in unison, but also help to monitor progress, help with communication and help to evaluate as the intervention develops.

Fuller, A. & Bellhouse, R., 1998, Model for Intervention in *Get Wise*

Schools and teachers have a crucial role in effective liaison between those involved in caring for a student's health and wellbeing. Important aspects of this liaison include schools:

- developing and regularly reviewing protocols to assist cooperation and collaboration between schools and other service providers
- clarifying the whole-school process including the roles and responsibilities of all involved in intervention support for students, from the individual teacher to the consultants working with school staff
- providing consultants with relevant school information, such as the student welfare policy and lines of referral at the school
- providing professional development for staff about the nature and availability of local services.

## 2 LINK TO COUNSELLING SERVICES

All good student support plans are realistic in their ambition and rely on comprehensive and accurate assessments. Comprehensive assessments may involve the expertise of a professional, such as a social worker or a psychologist, but they also rely on the quality of the communication and subsequent information provided by those who involve themselves with a student on a day-to-day basis.

A well-informed decision about appropriate counselling will often involve consideration from the student, parents, teachers and other professionals.

### Student support group model

An efficient and effective management model for this process and subsequent interventions is the Integration Support Group Model, which in the case of students with other health issues has been referred to as the Student Support Group Model.

The main tasks of a student support group meeting are to:

- identify objectives for students
- develop a plan to achieve the objectives
- choose strategies to implement the program
- meet and monitor progress
- review and adjust the program.

Successful student support group meetings are dependent on:

#### **1 planning**

- why you are having the meeting
- what outcomes are required
- how the processes and outcomes will be evaluated

#### **2 preparation**

- distribution of an agenda, listing issues with allotted times in order
- collaboration
- inviting input from all members

### **3 structure**

- introducing all members and explaining their role (the number of people attending student support groups may vary over time)
- informing members of objectives for the meeting
- articulating processes so all members are informed
- appointing a chair
- the chair managing discussions rather than engaging in them
- encouraging participation by all members
- attempting to keep meetings as positive as possible
- sometimes deferring issues for later discussion
- making the next meeting date.

### **4 documentation**

- treating meetings and documentation as confidential
- setting a completion date
- recording progress reports.

Where possible, including the student and parent(s)/caregiver(s) is an important part of the process. It is likely to positively contribute to:

- developing the student's own planning and management skills
- enhancing their understanding and interpretation of their predicament
- increasing their knowledge about support services
- increasing their own understanding of what to expect from various support workers
- making decisions that affect themselves, and consequently
- fostering a sense of responsibility for and ownership of the decisions that are made.

Fuller, A. & Bellhouse, R.,1998, Model for Intervention in *Get Wise*

Throughout the process of gaining additional expert support for a student, teachers must not underestimate the significance of their own continuing presence and involvement as known and trusted adults.

It is important that schools devise specific proformas to be used throughout the school to document the case management of each student needing support.

When developing proforma documents consider:

- issues related to confidentiality and privacy
- the need to write only objective data
- documentation of case history
- development and review of action plan for each student
- safe storage under the responsibility of the principal in line with the relevant advice in the *Schools of the Future Reference Guide*.



**When referring to Student Support Services, teachers need to follow the process and protocols developed by their school.**

**When referring to community health services, schools need to:**

- identify agencies/community resources before their services are required: contact names, numbers, after hours-arrangements and so on
- ensure a range of service providers are identified such as:
  - local general practitioners
  - mental health services, including crisis teams
  - adolescent services
  - child and family services
  - drug and alcohol services
  - services able to respond effectively to sexuality issues
  - appropriate resources for different cultural and religious contexts
  - specialist services, such as those for refugees
- check the professional bona fides of the service providers
- take into account the ethnic and cultural background of the student to be referred and of the professional, ensuring appropriate cross-cultural communication
- build in processes for feedback
- address confidentiality issues
- build in follow-up procedures
- measure and monitor outcomes.

### 3 ENSURE CONTINUITY OF CARE

The continuity of care a student receives is dependent on a number of factors including:

- quality of communication between those offering support
- commitment and perseverance of the main players
- flexibility of the management system to adjust to changes in aspects such as school and living arrangements
- level of resourcing
- efficiency of organisation
- attention to monitoring and evaluation.

#### Continuum of support

However, if there is one factor that contributes to a successful outcome, it is having someone who is prepared to support the young person over an extended period. Students often need a primary contact person who is supported by other colleagues who take on different roles. High-risk adolescents with more complex issues may also need:

- a ‘manager’ whose job it is to provide structure, containment and consequences for problematic behaviour
- an ‘advocate’ who will accompany the young person in their dealings with professionals and institutions and provide guidance (a youth worker who advocates for him/her)
- a ‘mentor’ who can remain in a neutral, engaging role with the young person
- a pastoral care teacher who makes time to have a ‘chat’
- a student welfare coordinator/year level coordinator/assistant principal who provides structure as well as ensuring that issues relating to ‘duty of care’ are being attended to.

In other instances, it may be a designated student welfare staff member who is the advocate and the year level coordinator who is the manager. Job roles depend on the level of support required by a student, the roles of school personnel and the resources available.

Inter-agency collaboration between schools, outside agencies and other professionals are a necessary and ongoing component of the whole process. The more complex the system of support required by a student, the more useful will be a model like that described above as a Student Support Group. These groups can be organised by the school or an outside agency.

Fuller, A. & Bellhouse, R., 1998, Model for Intervention in *Get Wise*

Protocols to assist cooperation and collaboration within the school, between schools and other service providers and with other government departments (Department of Human Services, Victoria Police) need to be developed and regularly reviewed. The roles and responsibilities of all involved in intervention support for students need to be identified and documented.

Teachers need some degree of flexibility built into school programming and resourcing to enable them to be available for involvement in regular support group/case management meetings.

#### 4 MONITOR AND EVALUATE PROGRESS

The monitoring process will depend on the complexity of the issues and the level of support the students and their families require. Monitoring can vary from informal to formal, scheduled processes where records are kept. Strategies may include:

- a pastoral care teacher or student welfare coordinator making time to have a ‘chat’ with a student
- a telephone call to a parent or guardian
- a pastoral care teacher or student welfare coordinator checking with the classroom teacher about the student’s behaviour in class
- convening a Student Support Group meeting. As well as operating as a central point of communication for the coordination of planning and review, the convenor needs to encourage people to implement agreed action plans and even act as a ‘bus service, caterer and dish washer’ to

ensure everybody comes to meetings. It is often the little things that can cause a support plan to break down.

Fuller, A. & Bellhouse, R., 1998, Model for Intervention in *Get Wise*

The monitoring and evaluation process, while concerned about measuring the progress of the 'client', is also concerned with assessing the level of implementation of previously agreed strategies and about making adjustments where necessary.

For those students requiring the support of a range of service providers, the issues in their lives are potentially complex and sometimes chaotic. The usefulness of an intervention will often depend on:

- the reliability of the service providers
- perseverance in spite of almost inevitable failures
- a preparedness to do the 'extra little things' like making sure a parent/guardian has transport to the Student Support Group meeting, as well as making essential arrangements such as ensuring the presence of interpreters who speak the parent's/guardian's preferred language
- following-up with people who may have failed to attend a meeting
- making adjustments to plans if they aren't achieving as anticipated.

Less tangible influences on the effectiveness of an intervention include timing and patience. Sometimes support workers want to plan an intervention on a timetable that they consider appropriate. However, if this doesn't accord with the young person being supported, the plan may be no more than a recipe for frustration and failure. At a later date, perhaps after a bad experience, the student may have a different attitude.

While taking a balanced view is important, the intervention should be as positive as possible. Those involved should avoid talking about the hopelessness of the situation or other negative thoughts. Focus on achievements, no matter how minor they appear, and build upon them.

Furthermore, while holding young people, their families and support staff responsible for their actions and commitments is essential, blaming is destructive. If someone is falling short of their commitments, it is more productive to understand why and adjust the Student Support Group plan to something more realistic, or perhaps to review job roles.

Fuller, A. & Bellhouse, R., 1998, Model for Intervention in *Get Wise*

Consequently, an evaluation process is far more than measuring the achievement of the objectives set for the relevant student; it is also about recognising and celebrating the achievements of all participants, as well as critically examining those things that aren't working and making the necessary adjustments. Evaluation should be a positive and focused process.

## GOOD PRACTICE

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### Student Support Group at Bellfield Primary School

Bellfield Primary School has a high number of students who can be classified as 'at risk'. The Student Support and the Integration Support Groups have played a key role in the identification of children at risk and the implementation of appropriate resources and programs for these children.

The process for identifying 'at risk' students was developed by the Groups in consultation with school staff. This has been published and used for professional development at a staff meeting. A Special Needs registry was also compiled, detailing each child's history of support, description of needs, services required and comments regarding progress.

Appropriate support has been provided for these students through a combination of whole school and individual programs. A comprehensive and inclusive curriculum has been developed. The Student Support Group has also put in place a specific process for monitoring student attendance on a regular basis. This regular monitoring has allowed the school to identify children with poor attendance records and to take appropriate action. Subsequently school data has clearly demonstrated considerable improvement in overall student attendance.

The Student Support Group has brought together a range of people with specific expertise both from within and outside the DoE and the school. School-based members include:

- the Principal
- the Assistant Principal
- the Student Welfare Coordinator (Convenor)
- the Integration Coordinator.

Representatives of external organisations and agencies participating in the group include:

- the local Community Resource Centre
- a local Family Care agency
- DoE student support staff
- local Council Youth Services
- a local Division of General Practice
- Department of Human Services
- the Royal Children's Hospital Paediatric Department
- Melbourne University Faculty of Special Education.

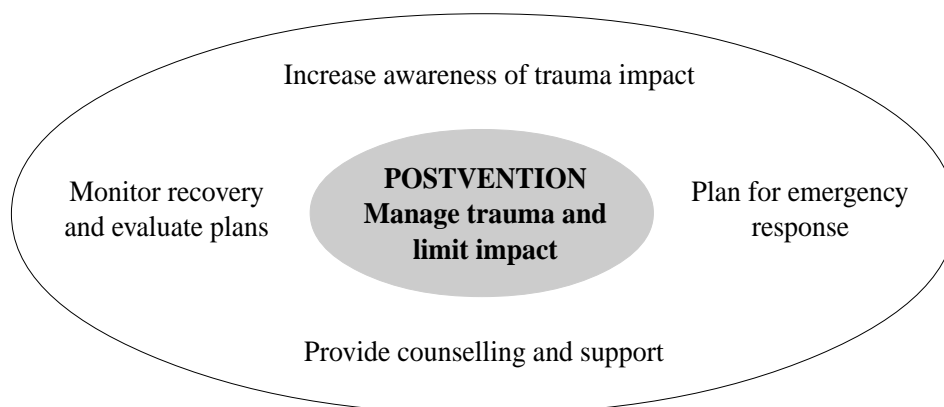
The school described programs for students 'at risk' as exceptionally successful in addressing their needs. However, the school is aware that improvement is a continuous process and is constantly reviewing curriculum offerings.

## 4 POSTVENTION

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### MANAGE TRAUMA AND LIMIT IMPACT

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**Best practice postvention is grounded in effective prevention and preparedness.**

Research states that preparedness, appropriate response and recovery activities following a potentially traumatic event can mitigate the impact of trauma related symptoms and facilitate the ongoing development of resilience. Schools and organisations that have response and recovery plans in place prior to a crisis reduce the likelihood of long term adverse reactions.

### DEFINITIONS

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#### POSTVENTION

Postvention aims to provide appropriate support to students, their families and other members of the school community affected by emergency situations or potentially traumatic incidents, particularly those involving death due to suicide, accident or illness.

Traumatic incidents are those which are extraordinary and are beyond peoples' normal coping abilities.

Postvention is the work carried out to deal with the aftermath of traumatic incidents, such as suicide, accidents or rape, in order to assist the survivors to cope with what has happened and to reduce the chances of further trauma, including suicide attempts and suicides.

The specific situation will determine the actions a school will take. These actions will vary according to the degree to which the incident is public, the age of those affected by it, and the extent of involvement.

Postvention activity recognises that in situations where there have been deaths, those bereaved (friends, family and peers of a person who has died) may be particularly vulnerable.

However, people may vary in their response to emergency or to potentially

traumatic incidents. It is not necessarily the event itself that causes trauma, but people's perception of it. Postvention programs assist in managing the effects of traumatic incidents, which can include strong emotional reactions (for example, anger, guilt, shame) that may lead to the development of depression or in other ways interfere with recovery.

Being prepared to respond to an emergency within the school or one that occurs outside of school hours but impacts on the school is vital to the successful management of the strong emotions that are generated.

## Planning for psychological safety

Many schools have detailed action plans to enact when emergencies (such as fires, intruders, assault or injury) occur. Plans for evacuation or 'lock in' (where it is safer to have students and staff indoors, away from an external threat such as a sniper or chemical spill) and looking after the physical safety of students and staff are often addressed within the DISPLAN component of the school's Emergency Management Plan. Schools also need plans ensuring the **psychological safety** of members of their school community.

Providing a coordinated, orderly response to an emergency or crisis reduces some of the distress and sense of 'overwhelmingness' that contribute to the appraisal of an event as being traumatic. Traumatic events are mostly 'out of control' and 'overwhelming'; such events are beyond the individual's normal coping ability and are perceived as being traumatic by the individual.

Emergency management and recovery response span the four levels of activity in the Framework.

The effects of a critical incident can be lasting, depending upon the quality of the individual's experiences during or shortly after the incident. The degree and rate of recovery is determined in part by the extent to which the individual is surrounded by supportive, caring people who help him or her to deal with the after-effects of the experience.

Whitla, M, 1994

### ***MANAGING SCHOOL EMERGENCIES: MINIMISING THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON STAFF AND STUDENTS***

This manual, distributed by the DoE Emergency Management Unit, is a comprehensive resource to help all schools meet their emergency planning obligations. It provides schools, regions and school support services with policy and procedures for managing a range of emergencies and traumatic events.

The manual details such important areas as:

- planning to manage risks and deal with emergencies
- trauma reactions-students, their families, staff and others
- short, medium and long-term tasks
- roles and responsibilities for regional and school-based staff
- how traumatic incidents should be reported.

There are also photocopy sheets re trauma reactions, tasks, record-keeping, contact lists and media releases.

<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/safety/emergency.pdf>



## STRATEGIES

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To manage trauma and successfully limit its impact, schools will need to:

- 1 increase awareness of trauma impact
- 2 plan for emergency response
- 3 provide counselling and support
- 4 monitor recovery and evaluate plans.

### 1 INCREASE AWARENESS OF TRAUMA IMPACT

Teachers need to be aware of how people can be affected by potentially traumatic incidents and emergencies. They need to:

- be aware of the need to monitor the reactions of vulnerable students
- ensure that they have ongoing support for themselves and their colleagues when they are involved in managing a traumatic incident.

### 2 PLAN FOR EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Bringing a measure of control and calm to an emergency, planning for recovery and providing age-appropriate information about what has happened can reduce the likelihood of an event being considered traumatic. For school-aged children, the appraisal of an event occurs by watching adult reactions and making judgements about how dangerous or distressing an event is, in terms of their own life experience. A school plan allows teachers to prepare an organisational response and to put in place support for their own emotional response to an event.

#### School plans

A sample school emergency plan is available in the DoE document *Managing School Emergencies: Minimising the Impact of Trauma on Staff and Students*

Effective management in postvention is dependent on the preventive approach of good planning.

Schools are required to have a plan that addresses response and recovery. Plans need to be made for the physical and psychological safety of members of the school community. The plan should include provision for professional development to increase staff awareness of the possible impact of traumatic events on themselves and their students.

Teachers need easy access to the manual *Managing School Emergencies: Minimising the Impact of Trauma on Staff and Students*, in order to be informed about current DoE policy and procedures, particularly their own roles and responsibilities. Principals need to ensure that school emergency management plans are developed, consistent with the manual, to enable effective response to a range of traumatic incidents. Specific plans will be needed for some specific situations such as suicide, accidents, bereavement due to death of student or teacher, and drug incidents.

## Roles and tasks

Identifying specific roles or tasks for teaching staff and provided for appropriate training can help to ensure an effective and organised response. Knowing one's specified role in an emergency can reduce the potential psychological distress experienced by teachers and others with responsibility at such times.

## Effective communication

Planning for effective communication underpins successful response and recovery management. Issues to address include:

- roles and responsibilities for informing members of the school community
- administrative support during and after an emergency, such as handling a significant increase in telephone queries.

## Professional development

All school staff need training about the development and implementation of emergency or traumatic incident plans.

# 3 PROVIDE COUNSELLING AND SUPPORT

## Supporting members of the school community

Support for students and members of the school community during and after an emergency will promote positive resolution of the experience. Research into resilience and effective management of emergencies emphasises the importance of connectedness and community. Events that are potentially traumatising affect the entire school community, and planning should include supporting families, especially as children generally interpret the seriousness of the event by the response of significant adults.

## Identifying adverse reactions

The school plan should aim to educate parents and teachers to increase awareness of children's needs in emergencies and signs of adverse reactions. Research has indicated that parents and teachers tend to underestimate the impact that such events have on children and young people.

## Self-care

Self-care, providing support and responding to emergency events uses lot of time and emotional energy. As part of the affected community, it is important that teachers are aware that such events take a personal toll. Talking to a trusted colleague or Student Support Services Officer may help to prevent the development of difficulties.

Formal debriefing support, as outlined in a sample school emergency plan, is available in *Managing School Emergencies: Minimising the Impact of Trauma on Staff and Students*.

Effective support for staff should include:

- administrative support
- personal support
- collegiate support



- professional support
- structured defusing or debriefing meetings coordinated by appropriately trained professionals
- review and evaluation of the plans after any implementation.

from Whitla, M., 1994

#### 4 MONITOR RECOVERY AND EVALUATE PLANS

It is vital to recognise that short-term support is only one phase in appropriate postvention activity. Recovery can take years in some cases. Some students and staff may need ongoing counselling and support. Their needs can become submerged as school routines are re-established.

Long-term recovery management requires a continuing awareness of individual needs and reactions and a process for managing those responses.

Long-term issues and tasks include recognition of significant dates such as the anniversary of the emergency.

It is also useful at this time to re-examine the school's emergency management plan, to revise on the basis of what worked well and what didn't work.

*Managing School Emergencies: Minimising the Impact of Trauma on Staff and Students*

It is also important to inform any new teacher about the child's, class's or staff member's experience and possible triggers that may cause a re-emergence of symptoms.

### GOOD PRACTICE

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#### A RECOVERY PROCESS AT A PRIMARY SCHOOL

Late in the school year, a prep student was struck by a car while walking home from school with her mother, brother and sister. Her injuries were extremely serious and she died overnight. The school had recently begun the process of familiarising staff with the manual, *Managing School Emergencies* as part of the Emergency Management Procedures it was developing. On behalf of all involved, the principal acknowledged the powerful dimensions of the impact of the tragedy on the school community.

The following strategies were found to be useful in coping at different stages.

##### **Staff**

- Meetings of senior staff before school each morning to discuss procedures for the day and to clarify roles of key people. For example, all phonecalls were handled by two senior staff to allow for consistency.

- Close familiarisation of senior staff with all components of *Managing School Emergencies*, in particular the check lists for Short Term, Medium Term and Long Term responses.
- Debriefing of staff at the end of the day. The tragedy had acted as a ‘trigger’ for certain staff, and it was essential to have a general debriefing. Guidance officers were available for those staff requiring assistance.
- Time release provision for all staff. Casual relief teachers, who were familiar to the students, were brought in to the school for a half-day each week for the first few weeks after the accident. A roster was established and some teachers chose to take the half-day away from the school to enable recovery.

### **Students**

- Immediate identification of children who were witnesses to the accident and ongoing systematic follow-up.
- Involvement of guidance officers on a daily basis.
- News of the death was broken to the children by their grade teachers, with whom they had close rapport. An *en masse* arrangement was avoided to reduce a ‘snowball’ reaction.
- Different handling of younger and older children. The major ‘at risk’ group was the sensitive and intelligent Years 5–6 girls.
- Coordination by Junior School Council of ways to remember the student. The School Council representative did this in consultation with the grades.

### **Community**

- People were ‘lingering’ and it was good to gather them together and provide a focus. Daily address to any parents present in the school to:
  - provide a clear presentation of the facts
  - inform them of what the school was doing
  - determine how their offers of help could be directed
  - communicate signs to watch for in their children and how to take action if a problem arose.
- A daily newsletter was sent home to every family outlining the above actions.
- Availability of guidance officers on a daily basis.
- A support group morning tea was organised at the school for three strangers who had been first on the scene and who had delivered CPR. These people were traumatised and found it very comforting to talk with each other. They also availed themselves of counselling at the school.
- Establishment of meeting rooms; for example, parent recovery room.
- Nomination and involvement of a parent coordinator for the student’s family. This was a person who knew the family well and was comfortable with them. The number of phonecalls and visits to the

house by well-meaning people needed to be managed. The help offered then became channelled effectively.

- School Council held an extraordinary meeting to coordinate support to the family. This included a food roster, playgroup roster, catering arrangements after the funeral, and the establishment of a fund.

The communication and support functions remained high throughout the crisis. The principal describes the *Managing School Emergencies* manual as 'a magnificent resource'. The recovery process continues.

## A RECOVERY PROCESS AT A METROPOLITAN SECONDARY COLLEGE

Following the recent suicide of a student, secondary college students and staff spent some months working through a process of recovery. A well-informed and coordinated response facilitates the process of recovery.

Some learnings relating to those difficult first days may assist other schools:

- Check with family to determine what information can be released.
- Provide honest and unambiguous information to staff and students while avoiding excessive detail.
- Provide staff with a written statement to guide them in informing students.
- Provide support from a member of the management team to those teachers who feel they cannot deal with this task.
- Identify those students closest to the deceased and inform them before the rest of the school.
- Contact the parents of those particular students and allow these students to talk to their parents; encourage students to stay together at school.
- Inform all students in classroom groups rather than large assemblies. This allows for greater containment and easier identification of those who may need additional support.
- Provide a recovery room for students to spend time together.
- Have counsellors available to work with individual students, groups of students and staff.
- Be prepared for ongoing provision of additional support; recovery is a long and painful process.
- Prepare a statement to be sent home to all parents/families advising them of the facts of the matter and assuring them of the support being offered to students.
- Provide avenues for members of the recovery team to support one another and the rest of the staff. Several meetings need to be held within those first few days and issues revisited over a period of months.
- Have a clear and up-to-date emergency management plan.

## BACKGROUND

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Early in 1998, the Department of Education responded to recommendations from the *Suicide Prevention Victorian Task Force Report, July 1997* and used state government funding to strengthen student welfare provision, by announcing a framework to refocus student support services.

### **Student wellbeing**

Essentially, the report expressed great concern about the decline in many indicators of the wellbeing of young people over the past forty years with increased incidence of depression, self-harm, drug misuse, family conflict, eating disorders, homelessness and unemployment. The report expressed considerable concern about the level of depressive symptoms in young people.

These views echo concerns expressed in the *Report of the Premier's Drug Advisory Council, Drugs and our Community, March 1996*. Young people at high risk of illicit drug use were also 'vulnerable to other health risks, including psychiatric illness, self-damage or mutilation, youth suicide, nutritional disorders, and the broad cluster of problems that are often associated with social disadvantages such as homelessness, family disruption and unemployment.'

### **Strengthening continuity of care in partnership with the community**

Both reports commended the excellent examples of pastoral care and student welfare infrastructure in many Victorian schools, but reported that student welfare provision needed strengthening: to be more widespread, consistent, in stronger partnership with the community and better coordinated with external services.

## CONCLUSION

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Schools can use the *Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools* to enhance their response to the needs of students as they learn and develop by:

- placing a high priority on developing and maintaining a positive, caring school environment where a sense of belonging is nurtured as part of their school charter
- working increasingly in partnership with families, support services and agencies and other sectors in the community on strategic approaches to student wellbeing
- contributing to a continuum of support for students across each of the four levels of activity, with particular emphasis on primary prevention and early intervention activities.
- updating teacher knowledge and skills concerning policies and strategies for student support.

## ASSOCIATED DOCUMENTS

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Department of Education, Victoria, 1998, *Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools*

Suicide Prevention Victorian Task Force, 1997, *Suicide Prevention Victorian Task Force Report, July 1997*

The Victorian Government Response to Suicide Prevention Taskforce Report  
Premier's Drug Advisory Council, 1996, *Drugs and our Community, Report of the Premier's Drug Advisory Council, March 1996*

Department of Education, Victoria, 1997, *Managing School Emergencies: Minimising the Impact of Trauma on Staff and Students*

### Other Useful Documents

Department of Education, 1994, *Guidelines for Developing the Student Code of Conduct*

Department of Education, 1996, *Schools of the Future Reference Guide*

Department of Education, 1997, *Program for Students with Disabilities and Impairments*

Department of Education, 1997, *Student Attendance Guidelines, 1997*

Department of Education, 1997, *Leading Teacher Development Program Guide*

Department of Education, 1997, *Get Real: A Harm Minimisation Approach to Drug Education for Primary and Secondary Schools*

Department of Education, 1999, *Get Wise; Student Welfare Action Manual*

### Further Reference Material

Integrated Service Delivery for Schools: A School/Community Model



### INTERNET SITES

<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/welfare/index/html>

<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/welfare/youth>

<http://sofweb.vic.edu.au/safety/emergency.pdf>

<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/standco/sc>

<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/hps/>

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NOTES



## NOTES

# FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES IN VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS TEACHER RESOURCE

Student welfare is the responsibility of all staff working in schools. This document will help school staff, particularly teachers, by describing strategies to support:

- all children and young people
- children and young people experiencing difficulty in schooling
- those at risk of harm
- those in crisis situations.

Schools provide a strong foundation for student wellbeing.  
<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/welfare/youth>

Department of Education