



Department
of Education



About this Communique

The Department of Education (DE) – Community Sector Organisation (CSO) Governance Group is a quarterly forum for communication, consultation, engagement and collaboration between the Department and the community sector. Meetings are co-chaired by the Department and the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) and reflect topics of mutual interest to DE and the sector. You can read more about the partnership agreement that underpins this work on the [VCOSS](#) and [Department](#) websites.

This Communique has been prepared by VCOSS to increase the visibility of this forum.

What was discussed in the Term 2 (June 6) meeting?

The focus of this meeting was mental health and wellbeing.

Schools Readiness Funding and Wellbeing in the Early Years

Pippa Procter, Executive Director, Early Learning Practice and Participation, Early Childhood provided a brief overview of [School Readiness Funding](#) (SRF) program. SRF commenced in 2019 and is now a permanent, ongoing feature of the Victorian kindergarten funding model. It funds services to deliver interventions that promote school readiness, with a focus on communication, wellbeing, and access and inclusion. The funding is available to 3-year-old and 4-year-old children in all early childhood education and care services delivering state-funded kindergarten programs in Victoria, including long day care. Whilst SRF is a universal program, program funding is not universally distributed. The amount of funding provided to services is based on the level of need in their service and is adjusted in line with parental occupation and education data, which is used as a predictor of educational disadvantage.

Mental Health Reform in Schools

Justin McDonnell, Executive Director Mental Health Reform, SEPS provided an overview of the mental health reform landscape in schools. Justin reported that there is a more cohesive picture of mental health reform emerging in the education system, and the reforms implemented to date have resulted in more staff and resources in schools.

Current initiatives include:

- The Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO 2.0) provides a continuous improvement framework for schools. It has been redesigned to place learning and wellbeing at the centre of school improvement.
- Direct support in schools – including [Mental Health Practitioners in Secondary and Specialist Schools](#) and [Mental Health in Primary Schools](#) (MHIPS) which is a partnership between the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI), Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE) at the University of Melbourne, and the Victorian Department of Education and Training.
- Flexible support for schools – including the Schools Mental Health Fund and [Schools Mental Health Menu](#).
- Existing wellbeing reforms – providing essentials (such as Breakfast Clubs Program, Glasses for Kids, and Affordable School Uniforms Program) and initiatives that aim to promote welcoming

and inclusive environments (Respectful Relationships, Safe Schools, Marrung Aboriginal Education Strategy and Disability Inclusion reforms) and support for vulnerable students (LOOKOUT program for students in out-of-home care and the Navigator program for chronically absent students).

Within the Schools Mental Health Fund and Schools Mental Health Menu program, there are 1,119 (72%) schools that have started the program. It is anticipated that the rollout will be complete in 2024 and reach full scale in 2026.

Research insights from the Centre for Community Child Health

Prof Frank Oberklaid (Professor, Group Leader and Senior Principal Research Fellow, The Centre for Community Child Health MCRI) and A/Prof Jon Quach (Associate Professor, Melbourne Graduate School of Education) provided an overview of the [Reinventing Australian Schools program](#). The program asserts that the core purpose of school should shift from focusing primarily on academic achievement, to focusing equally on learning, wellbeing, and health, for optimised whole child development. They have established five key principles to support a shift towards a more holistic approach to schooling:

1. A whole child and whole school approach
2. Co-designed, evidence-based, and flexible learning and wellbeing approaches
3. Health and wellbeing as essential 21st-century skills
4. Building an engaging culture of health, wellbeing and learning in school
5. Relationships and partnerships between services, families, and schools in every community

The session highlighted the importance of nutrition in mental health and wellbeing and emphasised that many children do not have access to a nutritious diet within their school day. The Centre referred to international research that CCCH have undertaken to explore the benefits of providing lunch to school children.

The importance of language in promoting mental health and wellbeing was also discussed. Jon spoke to the changing conversation about mental health in schools, and that language needs to be tailored in line with the school culture and level of comfort with talking about mental health and wellbeing. For example, some school communities are very comfortable to talk directly about mental health. In others, where there are lower levels of comfort, using language such as 'feeling wobbly' has been useful to help children and their supports talk about mental health challenges. Language is also a powerful tool to reduce the stigma that can exist around talking about mental health.

The [Children's Wellbeing Continuum](#) developed by CCCH is a tool used in many settings to measure child and adolescent mental health and wellbeing. The continuum-based model recognises that children's mental health and wellbeing changes over time, and aims to provide a simple tool for understanding and responding to concerns early to better meet the needs of children and families.

Next meeting

The theme of the Term 3 (August 29) meeting will be disability. Please contact VCOSS if there is something you would like to share with us, to guide our planning for future meetings.

Contact:

Joanna Hatcher (Policy Advisor, Education, Children, Youth and Families)

Email: joanna.hatcher@vcoss.org.au.