EDF5865 - Assessment Task 1

Addressing Eco-Anxiety in Secondary School Students: A Whole-School Approach

School: Mountport Secondary College

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Word count: 3330

Date of submission: 19th December 2025

Assessment 1: School Health and Wellbeing Project Brief

Addressing Eco-Anxiety in Secondary School Students: A Whole-School Approach

1. School Context

Mountport Secondary College (MSC) in the Eastern suburbs of Melbourne is a 7-12 government school with a student body of over 2400 students in 2025. As shown in the MySchool data displayed in Figure 1, MSC has a relatively even split of male and female students with 92% of them coming from non-english speaking families. The students are predominantly from Chinese families, with many of them being either first or second generation immigrants. The school is considered to be a high Socio-Educational Advantage (SEA) school with 52% of students assessed to be in the top 25% of students nationwide. This large, co-ed school has a teaching staff of 200+ and 70+ non-teaching staff.

The school has undertaken many health and wellbeing initiatives, often meeting school communities' concerns about social issues. School leadership have often followed trends set by legislators and other schools in implementing these initiatives which sometimes leaves them behind the curve. Often, students and parents describe the initiatives put forward by the school as “reactive” and “unpersonal” while leadership believe that the school is simply too big to move quickly and cater to all individuals.

Recently, a report released by the Australian Government on the current state of climate policy has seeped into many conversations at the school. While the school already has some government sanctioned sustainability and climate change programs, they believe there is a need for them to do more. Students appear to be more anxious about climate change and parents are afraid it will impact their ability to achieve in the classroom.

Figure 1: Mountport Secondary College MySchool Page and Data for 2025

2025

School facts

School sector	Government
School type	Secondary
Year range	7-12
Location	Major Cities

School staff

Teaching staff	202
Full-time equivalent teaching staff	180.2
Non-teaching staff	71
Full-time equivalent non-teaching staff	44.5

School links

School website

Mountport Secondary College

Sector, system or association website

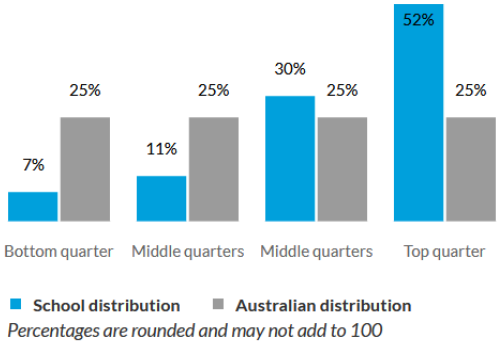
Department of Education Victoria

Student background

Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)

School ICSEA value	1124
Average ICSEA value	1000
School ICSEA percentile	90

Distribution of Socio-Educational Advantage (SEA)

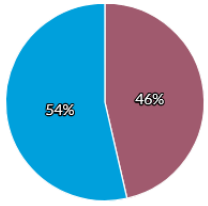


Percentages are rounded and may not add to 100

Students

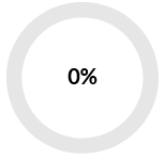
Total enrolments: 2417

Boys 1295
Girls 1122

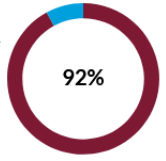


Full-time equivalent enrolments: 2417.0

Indigenous students



Language background other than English



Yes (92%)
No (8%)
Not stated (0%)

2. Priority Health and Wellbeing Issue Overview: Eco-Anxiety

Climate change represents a significant and escalating threat to the health and wellbeing of young people in Australia, with far-reaching physical and mental health implications. Frequently described as the defining public health issue of the 21st century (Patrick et al., 2023), climate change disproportionately affects young people, who are expected to experience more frequent and severe climate change related events than those before them. As a result, its mental health impacts constitute a critical priority for schools. This project focuses on on climate anxiety (or eco-anxiety), defined as distress arising from awareness of climate and ecological crises (Hickman et al., 2021)

Eco-anxiety exists along a continuum and commonly manifests as worry, guilt, grief, frustration and hopelessness (Léger-Goodes et al., 2022). These responses are increasingly recognised as rational and appropriate responses to climate change, particularly among young people who perceive climate change as immediate and unavoidable (Hickman et al., 2021). When unmoderated, eco-anxiety can contribute to emotional distress, disengagement and diminished agency, with implications for student wellbeing and learning. Conversely, evidence suggests that eco-anxiety can foster pro-environmental behaviours and a sense of responsibility when young people are supported to engage in meaningful action (Léger-Goodes et al., 2022; Qin, 2024). Hope plays an important role in enabling constructive coping and sustained engagement (Ojala, 2012).

Research highlights the importance of social determinants on young people's experiences of eco-anxiety. A systematic review by Niedwiedz et al. (2025) identified age, media exposure, peer and cultural norms, and socioeconomic status (SES) as key contributors, with eco-anxiety tending to increase into young adulthood. Australian evidence further suggests that young people living in lower SES areas experience higher rates of eco-anxiety than those in more developed contexts (Patrick et al., 2023). In Victoria, Sustainability Victoria (2020) reported that emotional responses to climate change were strongest among 15-24-year-olds, with 40-50% experiencing fear, sadness or frustration, and 59% reporting feeling overwhelmed by anticipated future impacts. Together, these findings underscore the need for early, school-based responses to climate change.

Eco-anxiety is also shaped by broader structural determinants of health. A key social determinant is perceived government inaction, which contributes to feelings of institutional betrayal, mistrust and powerlessness among young people (Hickman et al., 2021). These

perceptions may be intensified within school settings if students feel excluded from collective or civic responsibilities to climate change.

Commercial determinants further exacerbate eco-anxiety through the influence of digital media and online platforms. Commercial algorithms frequently amplify catastrophic climate narratives, reinforcing a "doom narrative" that heightens distress (Hickman et al., 2021). In addition, high-emissions industries have been shown to fund misinformation and "greenwashing" campaigns that obscure scientific consensus and complicate public understanding (Supran & Oreskes, 2017). Sustained exposure to these narratives can undermine students' sense of agency, leading to disengagement rather than empowerment. Schools are uniquely positioned to counter these effects through critical media literacy and explicit interrogation of commercial messaging.

A health equity lens is essential, as climate change does not affect all students equally. Students from First Nations communities may experience eco-anxiety or ecological grief more acutely due to deep spiritual and cultural connections to Country (Rigby et al., 2011). Students in rural or coastal regions face heightened exposure to extreme weather events, increasing risks of trauma, displacement and educational disruption (Patrick et al., 2023). SES further shapes adaptive capacity, with students from lower-SES backgrounds often experiencing compounding stressors related to housing, energy costs and access to resources, undermining mental health resilience (Hickman et al., 2021). Effective school responses must therefore move beyond generic sustainability initiative to provide differentiated, equity-informed support (Ojala, 2023).

Addressing eco-anxiety is not only an educational responsibility but also a policy imperative. The Australian Curriculum (Version 9.0) identifies Sustainability as a Cross-Curriculum Priority, requiring schools to develop students' knowledge, skills and dispositions to support future generations (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2024). Similarly, the Victorian Curriculum emphasises Ethical Capability and Personal and Social Capability, aligning with student wellbeing in the context of global challenges (). Aligning these policy expectations with evidence that agency, collective action and hope are protective factors enables schools to move beyond teaching *about* climate change towards fostering resilience that equips students to respond constructively (Léger-Goodes et al., 2022; Ojala, 2012).

3. The Role of Schools in Addressing the Issue

Students' wellbeing is a critical factor that contributes to their ability to achieve in the classroom. Evidence shows that students who are more connected in their community and feel more safe and secure in their environment, are more able to concentrate in class and achieve greater successes in their schooling (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2022; Education Services Australia [ESA], 2017). Supported by frameworks like the Framework for Improving Students Outcomes (FISO 2.0), Australian schools are encouraged to integrate wellbeing practices into their approaches to learning to achieve these positive outcomes(Victorian Department of Education and Training [VDoET], 2021). By promoting positive wellbeing factors in the school, students are more able to engage with the curriculum, leading to decreased school refusal, improved social-emotional skills, and higher academic outcomes (ESA, 2017; VDoET, 2021).

There are many avenues to promoting positive wellbeing in schools, one of which is to strive toward creating a "Healthy Setting" as described by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 1986, 2021). They propose approaching schools as an environment where positive health interventions can be implemented and lived by students every day. With key principles including partnership and community participation, schools who implement this "settings-based approach" would afford their students a greater sense of belonging and safety within their classroom environments. This could manifest in the many Tier 1 aspects promoted by the Victorian Government's High Impact Wellbeing Strategies (HIWS) (Allen et al., 2022). In multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), Tier 1 describes initiatives targeting the entire student body. By incorporating mental and physical health initiatives as well as programs like Respectful Relationships Education (RRE) at this level, students will be more capable individuals in and outside of the classroom (VDoET, 2017).

Of course, these types of initiatives cannot be implemented without the support of a variety of stakeholders. Teachers are often the first to notice when a student may be experiencing difficulties with their mental health (Allen et al., 2022). Ensuring teachers are appropriately informed and educated to triage these instances is crucial in helping students get the care they need while also preventing teacher burnout. Furthermore, the community extends outside of the students and staff. A whole-school approach to implementing these types of wellbeing initiatives would include the participation of parents and carers(Allen et al., 2022; Victorian Department of Education [VDoE], 2025). By keeping parents informed

and involved in the programs occurring at school, they will be more capable in supporting their students. By involving relevant community organisations when opportunities arise, particular students will get the opportunity to feel both seen and heard when the school staff may be unable to speak to a particular lived experience(VDoE, 2025).

Integrating wellbeing into the culture of a school in this way does not happen overnight and it cannot be done by the will of a single member of staff or leadership (VDoE, 2025; VDoET, 2017). It requires an immense amount of research, community consultation, planning and work to be effective. Schools operate as a constant in the lives of many students, and by striving toward implementing these kinds of programs, schools can better meet the social-emotional needs of their students, while also allowing them the opportunity to perform at their maximum academic potential.

4. Key Frameworks Guiding Action

Addressing eco-anxiety and climate sustainability requires a shift from isolated classroom activities to systemic action guided by evidence-based frameworks. A primary guiding structure is the Health Promoting Schools (HPS) Framework displayed in Figure 2 (World Health Organisation [WHO], n.d.), which the Victorian Whole-School Approach was based on (VDoE, 2025). Developed by the WHO, its purpose is to create an environment that constantly strengthens its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning, and working. For schools, addressing climate change, the HPS model implies that action must be taken across three integrated pillars: curriculum, school environment, and community partnerships. This means that while students learn about sustainability in class, the school must also model these values through sustainable practices and partnerships with local communities.

Complementing this is the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, a settings-based framework that identifies five key priority areas for action (WHO, 1986). Its purpose is to enable people to increase their control over, and to improve, their health through broader environmental and social changes. For schools, the implications are significant. It requires building healthy public policy (such as school-wide sustainability mandates) and creating supportive environments where the physical and social environment promotes climate change resilience. By bringing together the HPS "setting" and the Ottawa Charter's (WHO, 1986) focus on reorienting health services toward prevention, the school moves from a reactive stance to a proactive one. This ensures that the response to eco-anxiety is embedded in the school's very structure rather than being a temporary addition to the curriculum.

The Australian Student Wellbeing Framework (ASWF) displayed in Figure 3 (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2023), offers guiding principles for fostering positive learning environments and supports schools in reviewing their current safety and wellbeing policies. The framework's emphasis on student voice, agency, and safe learning environments is highly relevant to climate change as a priority health and wellbeing issue, particularly in relation to eco-anxiety. The ASWF (AGDE, 2023) implies a responsibility for schools to plan wellbeing and learning initiatives that respond to and acknowledge the impact of climate change concerns on student wellbeing. These concerns can be addressed through both curricular and pastoral care structures, including sustainability focused programs with Australia Zoo, and participation in sustainability centred projects that foster student agency and pro-environmental behaviours. Additionally, teaching coping

strategies through pastoral care and wellbeing programs aligns with the ASWF (AGDE, 2023) principles by supporting students to develop resilience and emotional regulation skills in response to eco-anxiety. When considered alongside the Ottawa Charter and HPS framework (WHO, 1986; WHO, n.d.), the ASWF (AGDE, 2023) complements these approaches by guiding Australian schools with principles to build healthy, positive communities that integrate pastoral care and wellbeing support with sustainability initiatives.

While the ASWF (AGDE, 2023) provides Australian schools with guiding principles for supporting student wellbeing, the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes displayed in Figure 4 (FISO 2.0) (VDoE, 2021) offers a structure specific to schools in Victoria. Learning and wellbeing is placed at the center of school improvement in FISO 2.0 (VDoE, 2021) and was implemented to focus on priorities shown to have the greatest impact on student outcomes. When FISO 2.0 (VDoE, 2021) is integrated in schools it fosters a positive environment, enabling students to be healthy and resilient lifelong learners, as well as active and informed members of sustainable communities. As learning and wellbeing are at the core of FISO 2.0 (VDoE, 2021), this framework justifies the allocation of resources to schools and staff to introduce climate-wellbeing initiatives as an integral component of improving student outcomes. These two frameworks allow a coordinated response to eco-anxiety, whereby the ASWF (AGDE, 2023) displays a national wellbeing vision, while FISO 2.0 (VDoE, 2021) provides Victorian schools with a structure for practical implementation, integrating planning, resource allocation and continuous evaluation of climate change as a priority wellbeing issue.

The international frameworks, Ottawa Charter and HPS (WHO, 1986; WHO, n.d.), provide a broad approach to promoting health and wellbeing, offering guidance to schools worldwide in addressing issues such as eco-anxiety. The HPS and Ottawa Charter (WHO, 1986; WHO, n.d.) share principles that uphold supportive environments, whole-school approaches and community partnerships which the AWSD and FISO 2.0 (AGDE, 2023; VDoE, 2021) translate to actionable strategies at a local level. While all four frameworks provide a guide that enables a response to climate change and eco-anxiety, ASWF and FISO 2.0 (AGDE, 2023; VDoE, 2021) provide expectations and structure relevant to the school context in Victoria.

Figure 2: Health Promoting Schools Framework

Figure 3: The Australian Student Wellbeing Framework

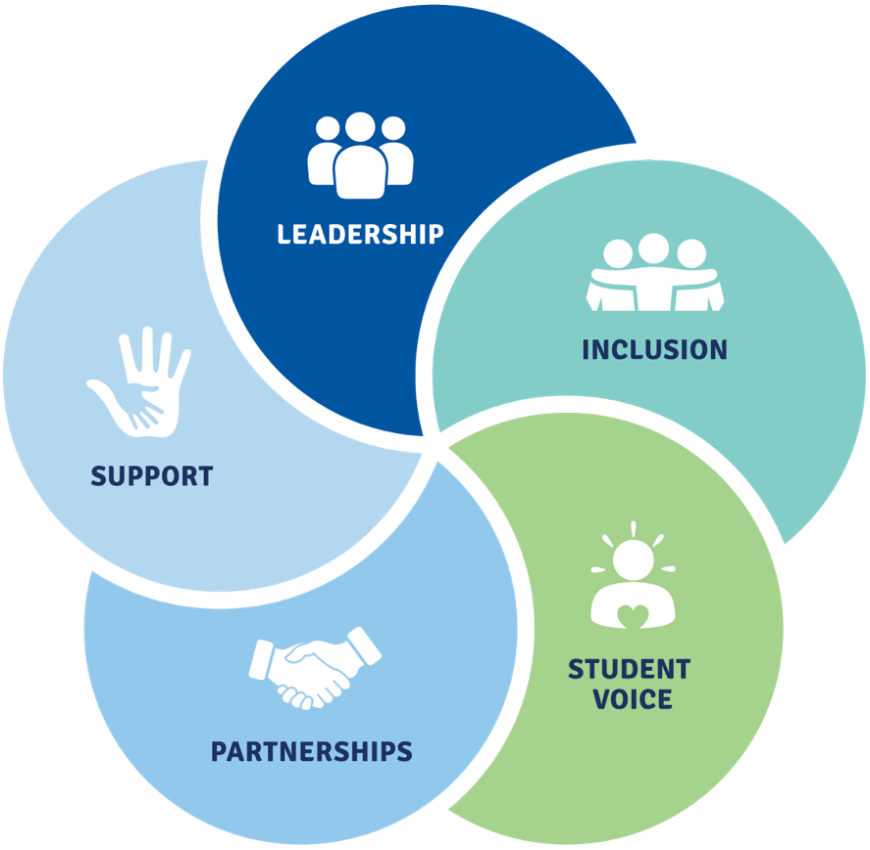


Figure 4: FISO 2.0

5. Insights from the Literature: A Whole-School Approach to Eco-Anxiety

Recent research consistently demonstrates that school-based responses to climate change are most effective when they move beyond isolated curriculum content and instead adopt whole-school approaches. A meta-analysis of climate change education interventions by Aeschbach et al., (2025) found that while many programs successfully improved students' knowledge and attitudes, impacts on behaviour, agency and engagement varied considerably. Programs that were sustained over time, supported by teachers, and embedded within broader school practices were significantly more effective than short-term programs or content-heavy interventions delivered in isolation.

Evidence from whole-school and whole-institution programs reinforces the importance of systemic implementation. Hargis (2024) demonstrated that schools adopting whole-institution approaches (integrating climate action across curriculum, partnerships and daily operations) created greater coherence between learning and practice. Similarly, participatory school-wide initiatives such as climate assemblies have been shown to foster collective efficacy and student empowerment by positioning climate change as a shared responsibility rather than an abstract or individualised issue (Cebrián et al., 2025). These findings suggest that implementation is most effective when climate education is normalised across multiple domains of school life.

Pedagogical design is also central to successful implementation. Design-based research into inquiry-based climate learning highlights the importance of structured, student-centred approaches that prioritise investigation, dialogue and problem-solving (Brumann et al., 2022). These approaches align with findings which emphasise pedagogies that balance emotional acknowledgement with opportunities for action (Corkett et al., 2025). Corkett et al. (2025) argue that when schools focus solely on climate science or "doom narratives", students may experience disengagement or overwhelm. In contrast, pedagogies that foreground agency, hope and collective action support both wellbeing and learning.

Across the literature, teacher capacity and institutional alignment emerge as key enablers of effective implementation. Lautensach et al. (2025) emphasise that professional learning and teacher education are critical in enabling educators to approach climate change confidently and appropriately. Without adequate support, even well-designed initiatives risk inconsistent enactment or reliance on individual teacher motivation. Taken together, these findings suggest that successful school-based climate education initiatives require coherent

planning, leadership support and pedagogical intentionality, rather than isolated or reactive responses.

When addressing climate change as a wellbeing issue within educational contexts, research suggests that deeper understanding of the causes and effects of climate change on natural and social systems has a greater impact on mitigation behaviours than basic factual knowledge alone (Tasquier and Pongliglione, 2017). Additionally, climate education needs to translate beyond the classroom and content-only programs in order to result in positive student outcomes. Focusing on mitigating climate change in practical ways using physical materials such as recycling and compost bins within the school can strengthen a climate-friendly environment (Hargis, 2024) and foster student agency.

To avoid tokenistic implementation of sustainability initiatives, a whole-school approach can ensure to include climate action in all subjects. For example, an educator from Finnish encourages the use of climate-related young and adult literature to explore environmental education (Madon & Steele, 2025). Building students' familiarity with sustainability and pro-environmental behaviours helps reduce uncertainty and thus builds climate resilience.

Despite the necessity and strengths of a whole-school approach to addressing climate change and eco-anxiety as a growing public health issue of concern, there are some barriers to implementation. A key component of a whole-school approach, as evidenced by the frameworks in this project brief, is leadership which requires a culture where examples of positive environmental behaviours are upheld (Rushton, 2025). As upheld by FISO 2.0 and ASWF, teachers need to be supported through effective leadership as well as adequate support and resources to implement climate change education consistently and address eco-anxiety through a wellbeing approach. Leadership is crucial to ensure that teachers are provided with the conditions to achieve agency, enact the curriculum, and therefore foster student agency and voice (Rushton, 2025).

Professional development for teachers and school leaders is essential to guide collaborative learning to allow these key stakeholders to share the workload and examples of good practice and address relevant challenges faced. Further, involving students in the design of sustainability initiatives and their climate education empowers student voice and is a critical enabler to successfully responding to eco-anxiety. Upheld by the ASWF, this framework explicitly showcases student voice as a central component of wellbeing, while the

Ottawa Charter complements this by emphasising community and empowerment. Supported by the implementation priorities outlined in the literature, FISO 2.0 plays a central role in ensuring school support student improvement through coordination of resources, planning, and leadership.

A whole-school approach that integrates curriculum, pastoral care and policy frameworks is essential for addressing eco-anxiety within climate education, enabling students and teachers to respond in informed, resilient and pro-environmental ways.

6. Recommendations

The case is clear, climate change related eco-anxiety is damaging to student wellbeing. At Mountport Secondary College, students are in need of a program that enables them to engage with climate change in a constructive and hopeful way. To the leadership at MSC, we make the following recommendations:

1. **Implement a multidisciplinary, hopeful curriculum**

While MSC already teaches much of the science behind climate change, much less time is spent developing students' ethical and personal capabilities (VCAA, 2023). Instead of focusing on ‘doom narratives’ and the seeming inevitability of a climate disaster, the school should engage their students in discussions that build resilience and promote action by both individuals and the wider school community (Corkett et al., 2025). By doing this in all classes, and not in tokenistic assemblies or projects, students can develop the personal capabilities to respond constructively to these challenges.

2. **Form a Student-Led Climate Action Team**

In alignment with the ASWF, a student-led climate action team centres student voice and gives students a positive outlet for action (AGDE, 2023). Student wellbeing is improved when the students are actively contributing to the positive school environment and culture. By supporting this team, and taking their advice in implementing school-wide policy changes, MSC leadership can work ahead of government recommendations and meet the unique needs of their student body.

3. **Enable Teachers through Targeted Professional Learning**

Teachers are not experts in climate science, and we shouldn’t expect them to be. However, if we expect teachers to effectively implement the HIWS with their students, we must also expect them to be supported by leadership and government (Allen et al., 2022). By enabling teachers at MSC to engage in targeted professional learning, they will be more able to discuss climate change and eco-anxiety. Teachers will also be able to more effectively triage wellbeing crises that may be brought on by difficult discussions in their classrooms, and direct students to relevant supports in and outside of the school.

4. **Establish Community Partnerships**

While MSC may assist their teachers in understanding how to manage eco-anxiety and discussions of climate change, we can look externally to find experts on climate science and action. Engaging community groups and local experts in these discussions allows students to

ask more pointed questions and get real answers. Additionally, MSC can involve Indigenous groups in discussions of historically recognised practices, such as controlled burning, which mitigates the contribution of bushfires to climate change. Connecting with the community in this way can help to ease the individualistic narratives that drive eco-anxiety and help students feel supported in and outside of the school (Hargis, 2024; VDoE, 2025).

5. Act on Advice

While all these recommendations are crucial to MSC addressing the eco-anxiety epidemic at their school, none are more important than this. Leadership must be receptive and ready to act on advice they receive. Whether it be from students, government, community partners, or staff, leadership must be prepared to fund and implement changes in policy and practice. Leadership is ultimately responsible for creating a Healthy Setting at their school and meeting the needs of their students (WHO, 2021). If advice falls on deaf ears, the situation will surely worsen.

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