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DGL21/166

Dear Ms Lourey

Thank you for your letter dated 13 April 2021, to Mr Mark Scott AO, Secretary, Department of Education, regarding *Living Well in Focus 2020-2024*, a strategic plan for community recovery, wellbeing and mental health in NSW. The former Secretary has asked me to respond on his behalf.

The Department is committed to improving the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in NSW public schools. Since 2015, the NSW Government has allocated more than \$290 million to support students' wellbeing and mental health in our schools.

The Living Well in Focus report provides a valuable opportunity to share aspects of our important work.

The Department's responses to the allocated Actions 3, 5, 7, 12 and 24 are noted below. The Department has also provided a response to Action 1, with a focus on strengthening community recovery and wellbeing through evidence-informed prevention and early intervention programs in our bushfire affected schools.

In addition, the Department is showcasing an international partnership with PAXIS Institute to deliver a universal evidence-based prevention program in NSW primary schools.

Should you require any further information in relation to this important work, please contact Pauline Kotselas, Leader, Psychology and Wellbeing Services on telephone number (02) 7814 2942 or by email at [Pauline.kotselas@det.nsw.edu.au](mailto:Pauline.kotselas@det.nsw.edu.au)

Yours sincerely



Louise Farrell  
**R/Executive Director, Inclusion and Wellbeing**  
29 June 2021

## LWiF PROGRESS REPORT 1, 2021: LIVING WELL IN FOCUS 2020-2024

**Agency/organisation:** NSW Department of Education

### **LWiF Action – 1. Strengthening community recovery and wellbeing through evidence-informed prevention and early intervention programs in schools**

#### **What do you plan to do?**

The NSW Department of Education is partnering with national and international leading mental health organisations to support schools in delivering best practice in prevention and early intervention mental health programs for students as well as training for staff.

In response to the prolonged and extensive 2019 and 2020 bushfires, NSW Department of Education implemented a broad suite of wellbeing strategies to support the recovery of school communities. This included the provision of additional counselling supports in impacted schools as well as the delivery of evidence-informed programs to build student resilience. A range of programs have been available to support schools as part of a collaboration with key agencies such as NSW Health and headspace.

An example of an early intervention program that has been made available to our bushfire affected school communities is Stormbirds. The Department is actively working with MacKillop Family Services to implement Stormbirds, an Australian evidence-informed natural disaster response program for children and young people aged 6-14 years. Stormbirds is based on the belief that grief is a normal response to change, loss and uncertainty that often results from natural disasters. Children and young people benefit from learning about how natural disasters may impact on their lives. The program is delivered by trained 'companions' who have undertaken a one-day training workshop.

During 2020, in a first for Stormbirds, the creator of the program, Professor Ann Graham responded to our commitment to make this available during COVID restrictions by developing an online version of the training. This has been a great success, with outstanding feedback from participants.

MacKillop Family Services has trained more than 100 companions to run groups in schools on behalf of the Department. There has been positive feedback about the Stormbirds program from trained companions and students participating in these groups.

#### **What outcomes are you hoping to see? How will you monitor and report on this?**

##### Outcomes

- The Department of Education's Strategic Plan highlights our commitment to prepare our learners for rewarding lives as engaged citizens in a complex and dynamic society. Supporting our school communities that have been impacted by the bushfires is a high priority. Through the delivery of Stormbirds children and young people will learn skills that will assist with adapting to change and loss as well as learning about ways that help in moving forward with life.

##### Monitoring

- Pre and post survey data will be collected from children and young people who participate in the program. Parent and carers will be invited to share their feedback and surveys will also be completed by the trained companions who deliver the program to students.

##### Reporting

- An evaluation of the impact of Stormbirds is underway through Southern Cross University in collaboration with University of Melbourne. The evaluation will examine the effectiveness of the Stormbirds program in supporting children and young people to understand and adapt to changes in their lives following natural disaster. An evaluation report will be completed.
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**LWiF Action 3. Responding to the needs of refugee students and families****What do you plan to do?**

At the end of Term 1, 2021 almost 11,300 students from refugee backgrounds were enrolled in NSW public schools. To support students from refugee backgrounds, and their families, a range of programs and strategies, that respond to their complex educational, wellbeing and settlement needs, are provided.

The New Arrivals Program provides staffing to schools to deliver short-term, intensive English tuition and bilingual support for recently arrived students who are in the early phases of learning English, including refugee students. English language proficiency equity loading provides ongoing support for students learning English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D), including refugee students. In addition, targeted funding assists schools to meet the additional learning, wellbeing and settlement needs of recently arrived refugee students.

A range of tutoring and mentoring programs help refugee students to engage in learning and plan their transition to further education and vocations by developing study and research skills, awareness of school and university cultures in Australia, and better understanding of available educational and vocational pathways.

In response to learning from home due to COVID-19, resources to support teachers of students learning English as an Additional Language or Dialect, including refugees, were made available on the Department's Learning from Home hub. This included the online EAL/D State Wide Staffroom which has a dedicated refugee student support channel to keep teachers informed about refugee education. This State Wide Staffroom is continuing to support teachers and is increasing in membership.

To assist students to access online learning, many schools provided devices to families on loan and assisted with internet access. Refugee students were able to attend school for advice on how to access learning online. These experiences supported students to develop skills in online learning that will continue to support them to engage in learning. Non-digital resources were also delivered to students' homes or collected from school.

Information for parents and carers about learning from home and how to support their children is available on the Department's website. It has been translated in up to 35 languages for parents and carers who do not speak or understand English well. To further assist effective communication, school staff members and parents and carers are encouraged to use interpreters. They were encouraged to make particular use of the TIS National Telephone Interpreting Service to support students learning from home. Bilingual staff members also assisted, and continue to assist, communication between school and home.

School counsellors support vulnerable students and referrals are made using school procedures. Specialist counsellors in Intensive English Centres and the Intensive English High School support the wellbeing and transition to school in NSW of newly arrived, high school aged students, including refugees. The Refugee Student Counselling Support Team, established in 2016, provides a state-wide service for refugee students and families in NSW government schools.

In 2021, twenty-eight EAL/D Education Leaders commenced in locations across NSW, including in rural and regional areas, to build the capacity of schools in meeting the needs of students learning English as an additional language or dialect, including newly arrived and refugee students. The EAL/D Education Leaders provide professional support to school leaders and teachers. Support includes advice and professional learning about wellbeing, pedagogy and classroom strategies, to support the learning needs of refugee students.

The Department develops a range of evidence based professional learning to build the capacity of teachers to deliver high quality education for refugee students. Professional learning and resources are available to

assist schools in developing strategic approaches to increase the engagement of newly arrived migrant and refugee families in the life of the school, and encourage their participation in their children's learning.

Teachers are also able to access a wide range of classroom resources and professional learning programs that support anti-racism education, intercultural understanding, inclusive practice and engaging all families and communities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

In regional settlement areas, Department officers, professional support teams, Directors Educational Leadership and principals work together and collaborate with settlement services providers, STARTTS and other organisations to provide settlement support, intensive English programs, counselling, homework support, transition to school and professional learning for teachers and school counsellors. They also collaborate to implement effective parent and family engagement programs.

### **What outcomes are you hoping to see? How will you monitor and report on this?**

The Department anticipates:

- The continuing engagement and participation of key stakeholders, including government, non-government and agencies and organisations, in the development and implementation of effective strategies to support students from culturally and linguistically diverse communities to settle well and achieve equitable educational outcomes.
- Priorities for future investment are identified and concrete proposals developed in response to identified need
- Evidence showing that the proposals and strategies have informed changes to practice e.g. informed Action 15 (resourcing strategy). This includes evidence from the evaluation of the EAL/D Education Leadership Strategy currently being undertaken.

## **LWiF - Action 5. Strengthen Aboriginal partnerships**

### **What do you plan to do?**

The Department has partnered with the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (NSW CAPO) to increase the proportion of Aboriginal students attaining Year 12 by 50 per cent by 2023, while maintaining their cultural identity. The NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated (NSW AECG) is a member of the NSW CAPO working in close partnership with the Department to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students as a delivery partner.

NSW CAPO is a representative coalition of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations in NSW including the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, NSW AECG, Link-Up (NSW), Aboriginal Legal Services (NSW/ACT), AHMRC, AbSec – NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation, and First Peoples Disability Network. CAPO provides a strong, independent, and coordinated voice to address issues affecting Aboriginal people including all the social determinants of health and wellbeing.

The Department is providing funding to the NSW Aboriginal Land Council on behalf of NSW CAPO to deliver Community Connector roles across two sites in Tamworth and Orange. This is the sixth initiative of the NSW Premier's Priority.

The positions will be based within Aboriginal community-controlled organisations that understand local needs and will provide a connection between the school and Aboriginal community. The Community Connectors will support students to attain HSC, while maintaining culture. The target cohort will be students completing their HSC in 2023 (Year 10 students in 2021).

Community Connectors will identify the strengths of, and barriers facing, each student and create a comprehensive, individualised wellbeing plan in partnership with the student and their family to identify

what supports are needed to support them to attain their HSC. The Community Connector will focus on linking and connecting students to appropriate services and support (not act as a direct service provider) and follow up proactively with Pirru Thangkuray is another initiative of the NSW Premier's Priority to improve HSC Attainment for Aboriginal students. Funded by the Department and delivered by the NSW AECG across 19 school sites Pirru Thangkuray is a cultural mentoring and career goal setting program to support students cultural wellbeing whilst also providing guiding career and goal oriented advice enabling Aboriginal secondary students to complete year 12 and attain a HSC.

In alignment with the Department's Aboriginal Education Policy and the Department's renewed Partnership Agreement with the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (NSW AECG), the Aboriginal Outcomes and Partnerships Directorate (AOPD) engage with Clontarf Foundation and National Aboriginal Sporting Chance Academy (NASCA) to provide mentoring and support services to Aboriginal students in NSW public schools.

AOPD also work with the NSW AECG on the Aboriginal Language and Culture Nest initiative. AOPD contract the NSW AECG to deliver Language and Culture teaching in NSW public schools in seven Nest and satellite Nest locations across the state, and to maintain the Nest Keeping Places (which house Language resources).

### **What outcomes are you hoping to see?**

Both Pirru Thangkuray and Community Connectors will support students to attain HSC, while maintaining their cultural identity and delivering culturally appropriate wellbeing support.

- The Community Connector will focus on linking and connecting students to appropriate services and support (not act as a direct service provider) and will follow up proactively with students to support attainment of educational and wellbeing outcomes.
- The Community Connector will meet students where they are comfortable and safe (provide an outreach model) ensuring that meetings are compliant with organisational work health and safety policies to manage risk in an outreach setting.
- Pirru Thangkuray delivers on country experiential learning encouraging Aboriginal students to develop a strong connection to culture leading to increased wellbeing whilst also supporting students to develop their own educational and career goals.

Clontarf Academy deliver mentoring and support programs for male Aboriginal students (years 7-12) in 48 NSW public schools and NASCA will deliver mentoring and support programs from female Aboriginal students (years 7-12) in 13 NSW public schools. Participating schools are selected based on the needs of NSW Aboriginal students and communities. This evidence is collated and analysed by the Department to inform decision making.

The mentoring and support programs aim to:

- increase attendance rates
- improve retention rates
- increase Year 12 graduation and attainment
- provide post-school transition planning to support students to develop career, education, training and employment pathways
- actively engage enrolled students to improve health, nutrition and wellbeing, develop life skills and build self-esteem, and
- encourage behavioural change and the development of positive attitudes.

The Department monitors these aims by collecting Semester and Yearly Reports from the service providers.



With relation to Language and Culture Nests, the Department's renewed Partnership Agreement with the NSW AECG now includes specific content related to Aboriginal Languages and culture. Each Nest or satellite Nest has a Reference Group, which are community groups which discuss and set direction and priorities for their Nest Footprint area. The Department works in dialogue with and reports to Aboriginal Affairs and the NSW Ombudsman on strategic direction for the Nest initiative. Current projects are in place to improve data collection, create pathways for students in later years of high school, and improve whole-of-school implementation of Language and culture. Under the Nests initiative, in late 2020 Language and Culture teaching was being delivered in approximately 99 schools across the Nests and satellite Nests.

**Please provide any additional notes or comments on the anticipated process.**

The NSW Premier's Priority to increase the number of Aboriginal students attaining Year 12 by 50 per cent by 2023, while maintaining their cultural identity priority is the only Premier's Priority to be developed in partnership with a coalition of Aboriginal organisations. This demonstrates an ongoing commitment by the NSW Government to ensure that Aboriginal voices and community led solutions are the foundation of priorities impacting Aboriginal people and communities. The NSW Premier's Priority to increase attainment of an HSC by Aboriginal students is also a key commitment of the NSW jurisdictional plan to Close The Gap.

**LWiF Action 7. Adopt Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration and National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023**

**What do you plan to do?**

The NSW Department of Education recognises the critical importance of school counselling staff delivering culturally competent mental health and social and emotional supports for Aboriginal children and their families.

In 2020, the Department worked with the Black Dog Institute to develop professional learning and a resource, Responding to anxiety and depression: Resource toolkit for school counselling staff. The toolkit includes valuable evidence-informed resources to support school counselling staff in working with Aboriginal young people. The training enhanced understanding of a stepped care model of supports, consistent with the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023.

To support the cultural competence of school counselling staff providing services as part of a newly established face to face and telepsychology service working in rural and remote NSW, the Department has funded staff to participate in training by Aboriginal psychologist, Dr Tracey Westerman. Key components of this professional learning included training in mental health assessment and suicide prevention.

Understanding the importance of cultural connection in assessment, treatment and intervention was also a key component of the training. The Department will extend this training to additional staff.

In collaboration with Black Dog Institute, the Department is delivering Youth Aware of Mental Health (YAM), an evidence-based universal mental health and suicide prevention program for students aged 14-16 years. YAM positions young people as experts of their own mental health. Role plays and discussions are used to explore challenging situations commonly faced by young people to develop problem-solving and help seeking skills, and build peer support. YAM was evaluated in an EU-wide Randomized Controlled Trial and found to be effective in reducing new cases of suicide attempts and severe suicidal ideation.

In 2017, Black Dog Institute commenced a process of a cultural review of the YAM program, led by Aboriginal experts in suicide prevention and schools-based programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander youth. The review indicated that YAM is a relevant and appropriate program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to participate in.

During 2021, the Department will be updating its postvention resource, with the support of Orygen and Everymind. A key part of this work will be to work with Aboriginal communities to develop specific guidance for schools in relation to postvention.

### **What outcomes are you hoping to see? How will you monitor and report on this?**

We are committed to reducing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in literacy and numeracy, as well as sense of belonging, expectations for success and advocacy at school.

#### Outcomes:

The Department is committed to delivering evidence-based practice in schools. This includes using and sharing evidence, research and data to underpin our policies and practice. Key outcomes anticipated include:

- A highly skilled and supported workforce that is delivering services in a culturally competent way to meet the mental health, social and emotional needs of Aboriginal children and young people.
- An updated postvention resource that is culturally sensitive and inclusive.
- Delivering evidence-informed programs that increase help-seeking behaviour and support Aboriginal children and young people to thrive.

#### Monitoring

- The Department commissioned researchers at Orygen and Everymind to evaluate postvention initiatives in NSW High schools. The evaluation includes a literature review to identify best practice, a benchmarking activity to evaluate the Responding to Student Suicide – Support Guidelines for Schools, survey of school staff and interviews with key stakeholders.
- The Black Dog Institute has undertaken a study across four regions in NSW to determine the feasibility and effectiveness of YAM within the Australian context.

#### Reporting

- An Evaluation Report by Orygen and EveryMind will be published on the effectiveness of postvention initiatives in NSW secondary school.
- YAM is being evaluated by Black Dog Institute as a part of the LifeSpan research trial. Research findings will be published by Black Dog Institute.

## **LWiF Action 12: Inclusion of families and carers**

### **What do you plan to do?**

Support for Young Carers at School, in line with the NSW Carers Strategy 2020-2030. This includes, raising awareness and knowledge in schools about young carers and strategies for support.

The department has developed the resource, Being a Carer, Being a Student, and Being a Kid, in consultation with Carers NSW, including young carers. The resource provides information for principals, teachers and student wellbeing support staff about recognising and supporting students who are young carers. Presentations have been delivered at inductions for school counselling staff to raise awareness about young carers and provide resources for support.

Parent and carer consultation and inclusion is an important aspect of the Department's continuing work under the Disability Strategy. This ongoing work includes streamlining processes and developing resources to support parent and carer involvement in service and program planning for students with disability. Parent and carer inclusion is a key principle of the Inclusive Education Statement for Students with Disability.

The department has also created a mental health and wellbeing hub on the department's website, with a dedicated section for parents and carers. This is a single-entry point to resources, information, tools and programs to support the mental health and wellbeing of students, teachers and parents and carers.

**What outcomes are you hoping to see? How will you monitor and report on this?**

Outcomes:

A key outcome for the Department is that every student is known, valued and cared for.

- Increased attendance, engagement in school, school completion and successful transition to further education and employment for young carers.

Monitoring:

- Monitoring this is challenging as schools may not always be informed that a student is providing care for a member of their family. We know from Australian research that many young people who provide support or assistance to family members with an illness or disability do not see themselves as carers, and can be reluctant to disclose this information outside of their family unit.

**LWiF Action 24: Investing in expanded mental health and wellbeing services and a skilled workforce in schools**

**What do you plan to do?**

Schools play a critical role, alongside parents and community in supporting the wellbeing and mental health of children and young people. There are over 2,000 staff providing wellbeing support to schools. They include school counsellors, school psychologists, student support officers, behaviour specialists and Wellbeing Health In reach Nurse Coordinators. This network of specialist staff have complementary roles and work together to provide students with support. School staff also work with the broader mental health care system for students who need more intensive services.

There has been a significant expansion in the school counselling service in recent years and this is continuing. Since 2016, the school counselling service has increased by 339 additional positions bringing the total to 1,129 full-time positions currently. To support the growth of the school counselling workforce, there has been a significant expansion in scholarships for teachers to retrain as school counsellors and psychology graduates to be trained to work as school psychologists.

Additional wellbeing resources for all secondary schools is also occurring through funding for 350 student support officers. By June 2023, every high school will have a full-time student support officer, and a full-time school counselling allocation, making it easier for students to access mental health and wellbeing support.

The Department of Education has also introduced a new telepsychology-based service to support students in rural and remote NSW public schools. The School Counselling and Telepsychology Rural and Remote Schools service, was co-designed by a comprehensive list of stakeholders and is underpinned by the principles of evidence-based therapeutic interventions, cultural responsiveness, flexibility, collaboration, strong relationships, and consistency of personnel.

This new service consists of experienced school counselling staff who will be able to travel to parts of rural and remote NSW and provide a combination of face to face and telepsychology services. It became operational in 2021, with four full-time senior psychologists education and one leader psychology practice. Over three years, it will grow to sixteen senior psychologists education and one leader psychology practice.

As well as increasing services in schools, the Department is building the skills and knowledge of staff through evidence-informed professional learning and resources. A workshop for school counselling staff, Youth in Distress: Managing suicidality and self-harm was developed in a collaborative effort between Black Dog Institute's researchers, lived experience representatives, subject matter experts and the Department's



school counselling service. More than 1,200 staff have been trained to date, with the workshop continuing to be delivered to new staff. This professional learning builds on the skills of counselling staff in undertaking risk assessments and safety planning.

A suite of professional learning is also available for teachers including SAFEMinds, a collaboration with headspace. SAFEMinds is a training package that aims to increase staff knowledge of mental health and emerging concerns, including anxiety, depression and self-harm. Face to face and online training, resources and tools, based on the latest research will enhance the capacity of schools to support the mental health and wellbeing of students.

**What outcomes are you hoping to see? How will you monitor and report on this?**

Our Department's goal is to ensure every student is engaged and challenged to continue to learn, and every student, every teacher, every leader and every school improves every year. This includes a commitment to a skilled workforce that is delivering mental health and wellbeing services based on best practice.

Outcomes:

- Children and young people are better supported through teachers and wellbeing staff having improved knowledge and skills in knowing how best to recognise, respond to and support students experiencing mental health concerns.

Monitoring

- Pre and post evaluations from mental health training will show positive measurable effects for improving staff knowledge and confidence in responding to mental health concerns in children and young people.

Reporting

- Reports showing the effectiveness of training programs will be produced.



## PART B ACTION 1

### PAX Good Behaviour Game



NSW Department of Education is the first state in Australia to introduce the internationally recognised PAX Good Behaviour Game. PAX Good Behaviour Game is a system of trauma-informed, behavioural and instructional strategies to build self-regulation in children, strengthen peer networks, reduce impulsivity and teach prosocial decision-making in young children.

#### THE FIVE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL CORE COMPETENCIES



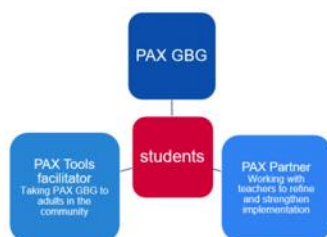
Longitudinal research conducted through Johns Hopkins University has shown that PAX Good Behaviour Game improves wellbeing, academic skills, reduces disruptive behaviours, and has been found to:

- reduce mental health symptoms across a range of mental health concerns
- increase academic outcomes as students are able to self-regulate more easily
- offer life-long protective effects for students' mental health, including lower rates of suicidality throughout childhood, adolescence and into young adulthood

Since announcing the program in June 2020 we've trained over 1,000 staff in across almost 250 primary schools.



Teachers are trained in using the PAX Good Behaviour Game by accredited trainers from the United States. Teachers then deliver the PAX Good Behaviour Game in their classrooms. Ongoing skill development and implementation is supported by monthly in-person PAX Chats with trainers in the US, and all staff trained have access to PAX resources via the PAXIS website.



The Department is also funding training for PAX Partners to support class teachers in schools; and a program for parents, carers and community members called PAX Tools. The delivery of PAX Tools is in partnership with the Department of Communities and Justice.



In a world-first research study led by researchers from Black Dog Institute in partnership with the Department of Education, we will evaluate whether PAX Good Behaviour Game leads to measurable improvement in the emotional and behavioural wellbeing of students. The research will also provide new insights into the factors that lead to the successful implementation and program adoption in schools.