

Feeling connected, seen and understood

Schools are embedding wellbeing initiatives while looking to partner with students and their families for the best learning outcomes.



How do schools foster the wellbeing of their students? For many schools, the answer lies not just in a counselling program or a few mindfulness classes, but in a holistic approach that embeds wellbeing across programs and equips students with the tools they need to flourish in the dynamic, challenging world of the 21st century.

“We believe that students thrive when they are afforded ample opportunities to become involved in a wide range of academic and co-curricular pursuits at school,” says Jessica Chilton, head of student wellbeing at Sydney’s Meriden, an Anglican girls school.

“Since emerging from lockdown, Meriden has seen a significant surge in participation in co-curricular activities and, as a result, we have appointed a dean of student involvement to oversee the integration of co-curricular opportunities into a holistic approach to each student’s education.”

Research supports the notion that connection can underpin wellbeing. The Australian Student Wellbeing Framework supports schools to foster the wellbeing of students and is based on the strong association, backed up by evidence, between safety, wellbeing and learning. The framework divides wellbeing into five domains: leadership, inclusion, student voice, partnerships and support.

“The wellbeing of children and young people is enhanced and their learning outcomes optimised when they feel connected to others and experience safe and trusting relationships,” the framework states. “Students who feel connected, safe and secure are more likely to be active participants in their learning and to achieve better physical, emotional, social and educational outcomes.”

In July, new child safe standards came into effect in Victoria and explicitly include wellbeing for the first time. But as the standards do not define the concept, experts say it can remain unclear what, in the context of schooling, wellbeing actually entails.

“Wellbeing is a term that seems simple enough on the surface and yet evades clear definition,” University of Melbourne researchers Annie Gowing and Rachele Sloane

PASTORAL CARE

MERIDEN’S HEAD OF STUDENT WELLBEING, JESSICA CHILTON. (ABOVE, RIGHT) ROSS FEATHERSTON, HEADMASTER OF BRIGHTON GRAMMAR SCHOOL.

wrote in *The Conversation* recently. “It’s often defined as the subjective experience of quality of life. It is frequently linked to mental health and, in education, is often conflated with attendance and behaviour.”

At Brighton Grammar School, an Anglican all-boys school in Melbourne, headmaster Ross Featherston says the wellbeing philosophy is to give students the best chance in life while they’re still at school.

“We know the challenges kids face, both at school and into the future, can be significant ... wellbeing is an important part of what we do, so that kids can go out there and be adaptable, resilient and empathetic.”

A positive masculinity framework is the central pillar of the school’s approach to wellbeing. Developed in partnership with leading youth mental health organisation Orygen, the framework encompasses three research-based domains.

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“The first is that the boys are authentic,” Featherston explains. “They know themselves, they’re confident and compassionate. Secondly, they’re connected. They build relationships on respect and trust. Thirdly, they’re motivated. They put this into practice and are motivated to do good things and be a good person.”

The school’s flagship years 9 and 10 capstone experience gives the boys an opportunity to put what they’ve learned about positive masculinity into practice. The capstone experience culminates in a four-day rite of passage hike in year 10. The boys undergo the hike alongside a significant adult in their lives, whether that be their dad, mum, uncle, older brother or a family friend. Over the course of the program, the boys participate in activities to foster stronger relationships, develop their communication and social skills,

and increase their confidence and self-esteem.

“The kids get the chance to reflect on who they are and what they’ve done over the past few years, and they share stories with their significant adult, and other adults in their circle. And when they return to school, they’re now formally acknowledged as young men.”

Meriden similarly takes a holistic approach to wellbeing and treats it as fundamental to the school’s sense of community and culture. The school’s pastoral program sees students meet their pastoral tutor and other girls in their year group every day. Among other things, the tutor groups are devoted to the discussion and reflection on issues and challenges.

“Our pastoral program aims to help our girls identify and develop their strengths. The key components that are woven through our programs include self-awareness, healthy relationships, ethical responsibility, service and finding purpose,” Chilton says. The program also encourages students to build positive relationships in all areas of their lives.

“Students learn how to respond to challenges and how to recognise, explore and manage their own emotions and responses to others,” she says. “Difficult conversations are not avoided [for example, consent, racism, bullying] as we consider how we can develop empathy and respect for all and celebrate our differences.”

At The Geelong College, wellbeing is threaded throughout the school under its “Triple R” program which emphasises resilience, relationship and reflection. Early learners engage in yoga and mindfulness most days, while, in the middle years, learning mentors talk about topics including motivation and general wellbeing. Senior school students have regular sessions on topics including goal setting and managing stress.

Schools are also supporting parents to play a vital role in fostering the wellbeing of their children. Geelong College hosts an online wellbeing resource for parents that covers everything from body image to drug and alcohol use, while Brighton Grammar sees wellbeing as the domain of a “three-corner partnership” between school, student and family, Ross Featherston says.

“If that’s strong, the outcome for the student will be better. It doesn’t mean that we agree with Mum and Dad the whole time. Of course, we can have disagreements, but that’s okay. The thing that unites the school and the home is that we both want what’s best for our students.”

ANDERS FURZE

