

Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria

14 December 2023

The Alannah & Madeline Foundation (the Foundation) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Victorian education system across government schools, including student wellbeing and measures to address poor mental health.

We are a national not-for-profit organisation dedicated to keeping children and young people free from violence and trauma wherever they live, learn and play. Our vision is that all children and young people are safe and inspired with the freedom to flourish.

Through the Victorian Schools Mental Health Menu (the Menu), the Foundation offers our Trauma Consultancy Service for schools, which supports school staff to understand and work with children affected by trauma. Collaboration with schools is also key to our Children Ahead program, which provides intensive, long-term support for children impacted by significant violence or trauma.

Our recommendations to this inquiry are:

1. Assess how effectively the Schools Mental Health Fund functions to connect schools with expert support via the Menu. Aim to ensure all schools are well-placed to access appropriate available supports, including to help students affected by trauma to recover and heal.
2. Recognise that supporting schools to work with students affected by trauma requires more than one-off training for frontline staff. A coordinated, whole-of-school trauma-informed approach is needed which can also address the impact of trauma on teachers themselves.

Trauma can have serious ramifications for children's school engagement, affecting cognitive, emotional and social development and the ability to learn, regulate emotions, and form healthy relationships. Common sources of trauma are abuse, neglect, and exposure to violence. The [Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#) (ACMS) found that a quarter of young Australians aged 16-24 had experienced three or more forms of maltreatment during childhood, such as physical abuse or witnessing domestic violence. Child maltreatment is strongly associated with mental health problems. For example, young Australians who experienced child maltreatment are 5.8 times more likely than their peers to have PTSD and 3.3 times more likely to have generalised anxiety disorder.

This matter has particular relevance now, when concerns about the mental health of students and teachers are at the highest levels recorded so far, according to the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing [Survey](#).

We welcomed the Victorian Government's very positive investment in student mental health and wellbeing (\$217.8m over four years), which strengthens the support available in schools and aligns with Recommendation 17 of the [Royal Commission](#) into Victoria's Mental Health System.



However, as the Federal Minister for Education has [recognised](#), Australian schools face unprecedented problems of teacher supply and retention, with workforce shortages one of the single biggest issues facing school leaders across all school sectors. We are concerned that such pressures may be having the effect of limiting schools' ability to take full advantage of the mental health support options available, including via the Menu.

Schools may use their allocations under the [Schools Mental Health Fund](#) (2021-24) to [fund](#) additional teachers to support implementation of mental health and wellbeing activities, as well as purchasing programs or resources from the Menu. It is our observation that many schools direct their allocation towards funding teachers in wellbeing coordinator roles and similar, in a context of severe staffing pressure. Our perception appears to be supported by a statement in the Term 4 2023 newsletter of the Menu, which noted that 'of the 1,116 schools that have now received their Mental Health funding, more than 380 have engaged Menu providers'.

We do not doubt that the additional teacher presence is urgently needed and beneficial to many students. However, we are concerned that some schools are missing out on expert support. Teachers have strong expertise in their own field, which includes providing daily pastoral care to help protect student wellbeing. But different sets of qualifications and skills are needed to lead responses to complex mental health problems in students. It is important that such heavy responsibility does not fall primarily onto teachers in wellbeing roles. We wish to see all schools on a strong footing to utilise available mental health supports to optimal effect.

It is vital to address the impacts of trauma on teachers, too, which can contribute to burnout and attrition. In our experience, teachers who work with vulnerable students can be affected by secondary trauma, and the ACMS [reminds us](#) that many teachers will have their own histories of childhood trauma, compounding their workplace experiences. ACMS found 32% of Australian adults experienced physical abuse during childhood; 28.5% experienced sexual abuse; 30.9% experienced emotional abuse; 8.9% experienced neglect, and 39.6% were exposed to domestic violence.

Trauma-informed practice is growing in profile, but it should not consist simply of one-off training for frontline staff. A coordinated, organisational approach is needed. For example, we took part in a scoping **review** of 14 studies evaluating trauma-informed interventions in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, which found that one-off training was less effective than approaches which included consultation and/or coaching strategies eg. modelling, guided practice with feedback and reflection. Specialised coaching and consultation respond to teachers' needs and practices in context. These approaches give teachers the opportunity to reflect on their practice and apply the knowledge and skills acquired through training to their own specific setting.

Evaluation of the Foundation's Trauma Consultancy Service for early childhood educators, conducted by Monash University's Health and Social Care Unit (HSCU), returned two findings which are likely to be highly relevant to schools as well:

- Educators' knowledge, attitudes and practice in relation to trauma-informed care are strengthened through engagement with an experienced consultant who provides tailored and personalised support, coaching and advice, determined in partnership with the education provider, after first taking the time to understand the educators' situation, recognise educators' own expertise, and build trusting relationships.
- Support for frontline educators alone is not enough. To create trauma-informed environments and relationships with children and families which are sustainable in the long term, there must be simultaneous and complementary trauma-informed practice at an organisational level. Without the right support from leaders and colleagues, frontline educators carry too heavy a burden. To help address this, the Foundation, HSCU and ECEC stakeholders worked together to develop 'Trauma-Informed Practice: A Guide for Early Childhood Organisations' (TIO Practice Guide) and a community of



practice, both of which were found to be useful by educators. The TIO Practice [Guide](#) covers the need to foster supportive environments for staff and respond to vicarious trauma experienced by staff.

We believe these insights have applicability to school settings, too, in order to support both students and teachers affected by trauma to recover, heal, and thrive.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of these matters further. Please contact:

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