

1 August 2023

Department of Education
GPO Box 9880
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia

Submitted via email: NSRA.submissions@education.gov.au

Re: headspace National submission – Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System: Consultation

headspace National welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper on a Better and Fairer Education System.

headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation providing early intervention mental health services to 12 to 25 year-olds. headspace has 154 centres across Australia in metropolitan, regional and remote areas, as well as online and phone support services through eheadspace. Our work builds the mental health literacy of young people and reduces stigma associated with mental health and the associated barriers to seeking help. headspace can help young people with mental health, physical health (including sexual health), alcohol and other drug services, and work and study support. Our work also involves supporting schools and their communities with expert advice and guidance on mental health and wellbeing, and responding to loss through suicide, as well as major disaster events. At the heart of all our services are young people, their needs and the needs of those who support them.

The attached response focuses on Chapter 3 of the consultation paper, for which we can offer the most significant insight. Our submission highlights:

- the critical position of educators and staff in schools that enables them to identify changes in students' behaviours and promote positive mental health and wellbeing
- the importance of effective communication amongst school staff, parents/carers and young people to promote mental health and wellbeing
- the importance of strong connections between schools, local health networks and primary health networks, including bringing services into schools to build awareness about services, reduce stigma and encourage early help seeking
- the need for adequate resourcing for schools to build educators' knowledge, skills and confidence to support student mental health, implement wellbeing initiatives, and make appropriate referrals to other services.

headspace National would welcome the opportunity to discuss any aspects of our response further. We look forward to seeing the increased focus on student mental health and wellbeing in the next National School Reform Agreement.

Yours sincerely

Jason Trethowan
Chief Executive Officer

headspace National submission - Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System: Consultation

Introduction

headspace National supports the next National School Reform Agreement taking a deliberate approach to recognise the link between learning and student mental health and wellbeing.

Three-quarters of all mental health issues emerge before the age of 25.¹ Suicide is the leading cause of death among young people, responsible for more than 40 per cent of deaths among 15–24-year-olds.²

Many young people find transitions challenging, such as when they move from primary to secondary school, and from adolescence into early adulthood. During this time, they navigate completing school, making career choices, seeking employment and further study/training, and beginning employment. Young people aged 15 to 24 years are at particular risk of disengagement from education, employment and training.

Building mental health literacy amongst young people and their families, schools and communities is critical to supporting their mental health and wellbeing. Providing tools and strategies throughout early childhood and the primary and secondary school years can increase the capacity of young people to draw upon these tools to support them as they experience challenging life events and transitions.

The headspace National Schools and Communities Division partners with education, health and community sectors across Australia. Their experience with young people from the age of 5 years, indicates increasing concern about the mental health and wellbeing of primary school aged children. The Division aims to build the mental health literacy and capacity of education workforces, young people, their families, schools and broader communities. The Division leads the delivery of a range of programs that aim to encourage help-seeking, address stigma about mental health, and increase awareness and access to mental health support services. In 2021-22, headspace Schools and Communities engaged with 27,843 educators, 58,821 students and 7,526 schools.

Through our work with schools, and feedback from educators who have participated in programs we deliver, we recognise the positive impact that wellbeing programs can have on students, educators and families, and some of the challenges that the education profession faces in implementing wellbeing strategies.

¹ Kessler, R.C., Berglund, P., Demler, O., Jin, R., Merikangas, K.R., & Walters, E.E. (2005). Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Archives of General Psychiatry*. 62(6), pp. 593-602. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpsyc.62.6.593>

² Department of Health. (2020). A report detailing key themes and early findings to support initial advice of the National Suicide Prevention Adviser.

The critical position of educators and staff in schools to promote positive student mental health and wellbeing

Key takeaways

- School connectedness is a protective factor for student mental health and wellbeing.
- Educators and staff in schools have a professional responsibility to foster students' sense of school belonging and are uniquely positioned to notice changes in students' mood and behaviour.
- Implementing trauma informed teaching practices and implementing wellbeing initiatives across schools and in collaboration with families is critical to assisting with increasing mental health literacy and reducing stigma and discrimination that young people experience in relation to mental ill-health and early help-seeking.

Having trusted relationships with supportive adults is a protective factor for a young person's mental health.³ School connectedness, including the sense of belonging that students feel towards school and school engagement, is also a protective factor for young people's mental health and wellbeing.⁴

Fostering this connectedness is a critical component of an educator's role, including by knowing individual students and how they learn, providing safe and supportive learning environments, and establishing and maintaining positive relationships with students.⁵ For example, educators become familiar with friendship groups, how students interact, play and build relationships with others, stressors at school and in their personal lives that could affect their well-being, and how they manage stress.

"Connection during a time of hardship or uncertainty is one of our most ancient human desires, yet this year it feels as if face to face connection is under threat. From a student perspective, the relationships they have with staff, friends and family help to shape who they are and how they view the world. In recognising the uncertainty of life, we can help young people to understand the necessity of keeping connected to nature, passions, the present and people around us."

School Educator who attended SAFEMinds "Nip it in the Bud" training

³ State of Victoria. (2021). *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Final Report, Volume 2: Collaboration to support good mental health and wellbeing*, Parliamentary Paper No. 202, Session 2018–21 (document 3 of 6).

⁴ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2015). *Student Wellbeing*. NSW Department of Education and Communities. Retrieved from: <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2015-05/apo-nid235341.pdf>.

⁵ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2011, *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*, AITSL, Melbourne.

Educators have a good sense of students' baseline wellbeing and can be adept at noticing changes in student behaviour. ReachOut Australia, for example, highlights some of the signs that teachers are in good positions to observe, such as students acting out of character (e.g., changes in demeanour/attitude), having unexpected outbursts of emotion, constantly talking about their problems or avoiding friends.⁶

Educators are also required to establish and maintain relationships with parents or carers.⁷ This enables them to understand students further and hear opinions from different perspectives. It also creates further opportunities to share information about student mental health and wellbeing.

Trauma-informed practices

There is an opportunity to embed trauma informed practices in all schools as an evidence-based approach to enhancing student wellbeing. This could be utilised as an overarching framework on which to base all wellbeing initiatives.

Trauma informed practices recognise that many young people experience negative life events and that these negative experiences can impact on their behaviour, distress, communication and emotional regulation, and consequently their ability to learn. Educators who are trauma aware can proactively implement strategies and plan teaching and learning activities to support students' growth and learning.⁸

The Australian National University's BRACE Framework is one example of a whole school approach to trauma sensitive practice. The key components of this are: Belonging; Routine; Attachment; Capacity; and Emotions.⁹

Mental health and wellbeing initiatives

Promoting mental health literacy and implementing wellbeing initiatives across schools and in collaboration with families can assist with increasing understanding and reducing the stigma and discrimination that young people can experience in relation to mental ill-health and early help-seeking. These can be focused on:

- increasing awareness, knowledge and skills in mental health literacy; accessing support; and improving the wellbeing of students and families. For example, headspace's **Mental Health Education Program** delivers mental health education workshops in secondary schools (see Attachment 1);
- promoting and encouraging early help-seeking. For example, **NIP it in the Bud** resources, which are designed to give educators tools to start the conversation about mental health. Resources include factsheets for educators and families and are focused on four key areas: identify; relationships; social media; and the future (see Attachment 2);

⁶ ReachOut Australia. *Mental health support tips for teachers*. Retrieved from: <https://schools.au.reachout.com/articles/mental-health-support-tips-for-teachers#:~:text=Signs%20to%20look%20out%20for%20include%3A,too%20much%20or%20not%20enough>.

⁷ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. op. cit.

⁸ Stoke, H. & Brunzell, T. (2020). "Leading Trauma-Informed Practice in Schools". *Leading & Managing*. 26:1, pp. 70-77. Retrieved from: https://www.berrystreet.org.au/uploads/main/Files/Research-Articles/Stokes-Brunzell_2020_Leading-trauma-informed-schools_Leading-Managing.pdf

⁹ Australian National University. *Supporting Trust in Schools*. Retrieved from: https://earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/files/TRUSTBRACE_0.pdf.

- training for educators and staff in schools that focuses on early intervention. For example, the **SAFEMinds** training program aims to enhance early intervention mental health support for children and young people in schools, specifically in relation to mild mood disorders and self-harm;
- developing positive, inclusive and resilient learning communities through programs aimed at building educators' knowledge. For example, **Be You**, a national mental health in education initiative delivered by Beyond Blue in collaboration with Early Childhood Australia and headspace, aims to create communities where every child, young person, educator and family can achieve their best possible mental health.

There is an opportunity to embed a national approach to providing schools with guidance in selecting mental health and wellbeing services and initiatives that are relevant and appropriate to their setting, depending on their school's needs. For example, the Schools Mental Health Fund in Victoria provides schools with funding and a "menu" of items to select from across three tiers of intervention: positive mental health promotion; early intervention and cohort-specific support; and targeted support. Each program on the menu is also categorised according to the strength of the evidence supporting the program.

The importance of effective communication to promote mental health and wellbeing

Key takeaways

- Supporting student mental health and wellbeing requires consistent messaging from within and outside of schools, focused on building mental health literacy and early help-seeking. Established communication channels to help achieve this.
- Frameworks and resources can help guide strategic communication and ensure consistent information is provided to educators, schools and families in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing.

There is opportunity to promote consistent and proactive communications that mental health is an integral part of a student's wellbeing. Supporting student mental health and wellbeing requires effective communication within the school and in collaboration with families and local communities.

Educators can use established communication channels to discuss student wellbeing with families. These can include:

- parent/teacher/student conferences;
- parent or carer helper or volunteering opportunities within the school;
- wellbeing conversations between parents/carers, teachers, students and wellbeing coordinators.

These channels help to establish and maintain effective relationships and can lead to more proactive and open engagement between young people, their families, and the school when young people's emotions are not heightened and before they reach crisis point. For example, these conversations can embed a focus on the importance of connection, social learning, emotional self-regulation, help-seeking and local support services.

Friends also play a critical role as help-givers and in creating safe environments which encourage and help young people to support each other.

“Students spent an hour exploring the themes of identifying warning signs in their friends, how to have tricky or difficult conversations, and how to best find support to ensure their own self-care.”

School Educator who attended SAFEMinds "Nip it in the Bud" training

The workshops were important in helping students with balancing their social and school life and helping them with study stress. We learn that it's important to express your feelings, get it off your chest, and not bottle things up inside”

Year 9 student after attending a Mental Health Education Program workshop

Frameworks and resources focused on early intervention and communication critically help guide and ensure consistent information is provided to educators, schools and families in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing. This can ensure support is provided to students (e.g., through one-on-one discussion; via the learning curriculum; and in published school values) and in correspondence with families and carers. Examples of resources include:

- headspace's **NIP it in the Bud** resources, which encourage people to notice changes in young people's mood and behaviour, inquire sensitively, and plan first steps and possible referrals.
- headspace's **SAFEMinds website**, which contains information about major developmental issues and common concerns for young people at different adolescent developmental stages, which can assist in noticing when a young person needs support.
- the **Child Participation Framework** developed by 54 Reasons, which outlines five child participation practice standards centred around the idea that young people are more likely to feel safe talking about their mental health and wellbeing if they feel their voice is being heard and they are more connected to their families and communities.¹⁰

“Thanks so much for the amazing job you did with our Year 9 students. We have already had conversations with individual students using the Mental Health Continuum and it has given us a common language to use when working with our students.”

School Educator after Mental Health Education Program sessions were delivered to students

¹⁰ 54 Reasons. *Child Participation Framework*. Retrieved from: https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/63bc94aea859d812b4df39b4/6417d8e8e2165d55f4548c32_STC01839_54-Child-Participation-Framework-2023_SC.pdf

The importance of strong connections between schools, local health networks and primary health networks

Key takeaways

- Supporting mental health and wellbeing is the responsibility of the whole system, and all people involved in students' lives should work together to support students.
- Bringing clinicians and professionals from mental health and community services into schools can make staff, students and parents/carers more familiar with available services outside of the school and how to access them, and could encourage early help-seeking.

Supporting mental health and wellbeing is the responsibility of the whole system and all people involved in students' lives should work together to support them, including through fostering connections between schools and services.

Supporting strong partnerships could include bringing clinicians and professionals from mental health and community services into schools. This can build the confidence of staff in schools, parents/carers and young people in relation to supporting mental health and wellbeing. This includes staff, students, and parents or carers becoming more familiar with available services outside of the school and how to access them. This can help to reduce barriers to seeking help and encourage early help-seeking.

Examples of building strong partnerships in practice include:

- bringing local GP practices into schools, such as the *Doctors in Schools* initiatives operating in some jurisdictions, including Victoria and New South Wales;
- community-driven mental health and wellbeing expo days, such as events coordinated by headspace centres in local communities through community awareness and engagement officers;
- information sessions to raise awareness about the range of external services available, including vocational support, non-traditional forms of support such as peer mentoring, and the variety of ways young people can engage with services other than in-person (e.g. online, phone, video). For example, **headspace work and study online** is a clinically integrated employment and education support service that supports students in their transition from schooling to further study or employment.

“My team felt that the information coming from a fresh voice and expert in the field was invaluable. They all got something out of each session and feel more comfortable engaging in these conversations. Given that we have a number of students we are concerned about over the holidays- the homeroom teachers all felt that should a student reach out to them they could refer them to the great resources you shared with us and talk confidently about how mental health changes - it can be improved with small things and long-term strategies.”

School Educator after Mental Health Education sessions were delivered to students

“I could tell from levels of engagement and participation the workshops were very well received. I spoke to a couple of students yesterday who felt the strategies in dealing with stress very helpful. As of result of our workshops one student went to see our school GP yesterday and another student asked if I could take a picture of the phone numbers and post on our school page. So, these actions demonstrate immediately the benefits and success of such workshops.”

Secondary School Nurse after Mental Health Education sessions were delivered to students

Collaborative and transparent approaches to communication, service delivery and transition between services are also important aspects of effective partnerships between services and schools. Effective transition of care processes are needed to ensure reliable information sharing, which strengthens the support provided to young people. The use of multidisciplinary teams, including GPs, mental health clinicians and educators, could also ensure adequate support is provided, such as educators and wellbeing professionals at schools engaging with GPs and allied health professionals.

Collaboration and communication to support student mental health and wellbeing requires resourcing to ensure educators can build their knowledge and understanding and have the time to support students.

The need for adequate resourcing to build educators' capacity and capability to support student mental health and wellbeing

Key takeaways

- Due to workload constraints, educators can lack the knowledge, skills and confidence to enable them to appropriately support students' mental health and wellbeing.
- Educators hold significant responsibility in contributing to a protective environment for young people. Adequate resourcing is needed to build educator capacity and capability to ensure they are aware of the needs of students and can contribute to the development and implementation of tailored support plans.

Educators are adept at noticing signs of student mental ill-health, however, find it challenging to maintain their current workloads, and often their own wellbeing, with the added responsibility of implementing wellbeing initiatives and supporting individual students.

Educators have limited non-contact time and are often managing high workloads and varied priorities. They face complex systems challenges, such as lack of clear pathways to which they can refer young people for support. A Grattan Institute survey conducted in 2022 found more than 90 per cent of the 5,442 teachers surveyed don't have enough time to prepare effectively for classroom teaching – their core role – and 74 per cent reported not having enough support for struggling students with complex needs.¹¹

¹¹ Hunter, J., Sonnemann, J., & Joiner, R. (2022). *Making time for great teaching: How better government policy can help*. Grattan Institute. Retrieved from: <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Making-time-for-great-teaching-how-better-government-policy-can-help-Grattan-Report.pdf>.

headspace National Schools and Communities teams who interact directly with schools receive ongoing feedback from educators of increasing numbers of students displaying complex behaviours relating to self-harm, vaping, social media use, bullying and suicidal behaviours. Our teams also highlight increasing prevalence of self-harm and suicidal ideation and behaviour in primary school settings.

Educators are reporting to headspace National staff that attending professional learning is not achievable due to workload challenges and the inability to find relief teachers. Schools have limited capacity to release educators from their teaching loads to engage in mental health and wellbeing training and implement wellbeing strategies.

Due to these constraints, educators can lack the knowledge, skills and confidence to enable them to appropriately support individual students. Building the capability of educators requires appropriate resourcing.

Educators hold significant responsibility in classroom settings for young people with mental health issues, particularly those who have not yet begun seeking support from a mental health clinician, or who cannot access sufficient mental health care. For these students, schools can function as a protective environment. As 'accidental' counsellors/care-givers, educators can support students but only if they are aware of the needs of the young person and their mental health, and are equipped with the skills, knowledge and confidence to support the student. They can contribute to the development of tailored support plans and can ensure the plans are implemented adequately to ensure these students are well supported.

School staff, while operating within the scope of their role, can support students by knowing how to recognise when a student needs support, what questions to ask if they have concerns about a student, and being aware of services and referral pathways that are available, so that they can provide this information to students and parents/carers and encourage them to access the support they need.

Strong coordination from mental health services is required to achieve this, for example, to assist in educators interpreting:

- support plans and translating them to classroom settings, after they have been developed collaboratively with a mental health clinician, the student's parents and, if age-appropriate, the student. Support within the school is critical to students receiving the support they need at school.
- information provided by a treating mental health practitioner. This information is sometimes provided to the young person to pass on to the educator and the educator is not always best placed to interpret this and take action to support the student.

Practical supports can also be useful, such as providing educators with time relief to liaise and meet with families and support staff to develop and implement individual support/learning plans.

Equally, it is important for parents/carers to be aware of available referral pathways. **NIP it in the bud**, outlined in Attachment 2, provides a toolkit to support educators, families and friends to notice behaviour change, start a conversation about it, and provide support or referral pathways.

“Being provided with a structure and examples of appropriate/useful language to ask questions increased my confidence. These were very relevant to my role.”

School Educator who attended SAFEMinds "Nip it in the Bud" training

For schools to prioritise resourcing for building educator capability and capacity, there needs to be awareness and understanding from government about mental health and wellbeing issues, and a commitment to supporting school educator capacity to improving student wellbeing. With this support, schools would have increased capacity to resource and prioritise wellbeing in their improvement plans to enable educators to undertake professional learning and implement wellbeing approaches in their schools. For this to occur, system-wide improvement is required, that recognises current challenges and prioritises improvement in educator capability and capacity.

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Attachment 1:

Mental Health Education Program information

Program overview

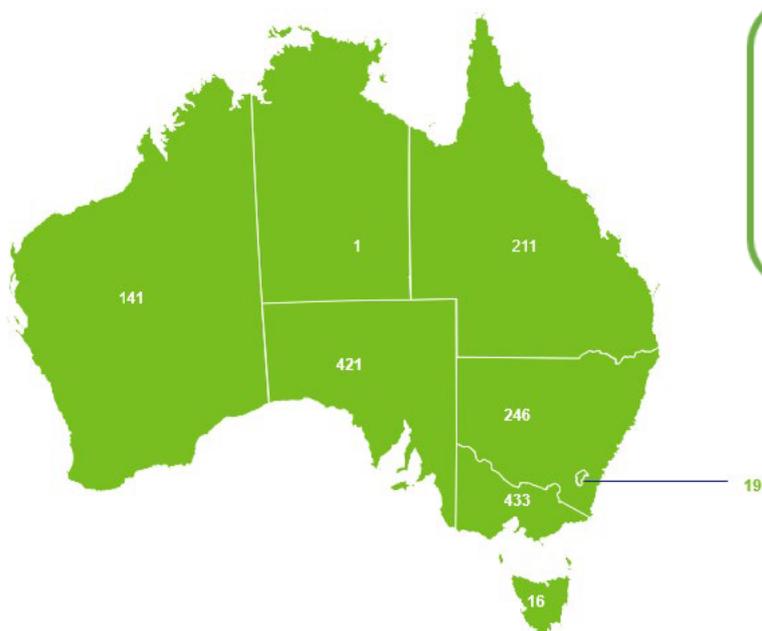
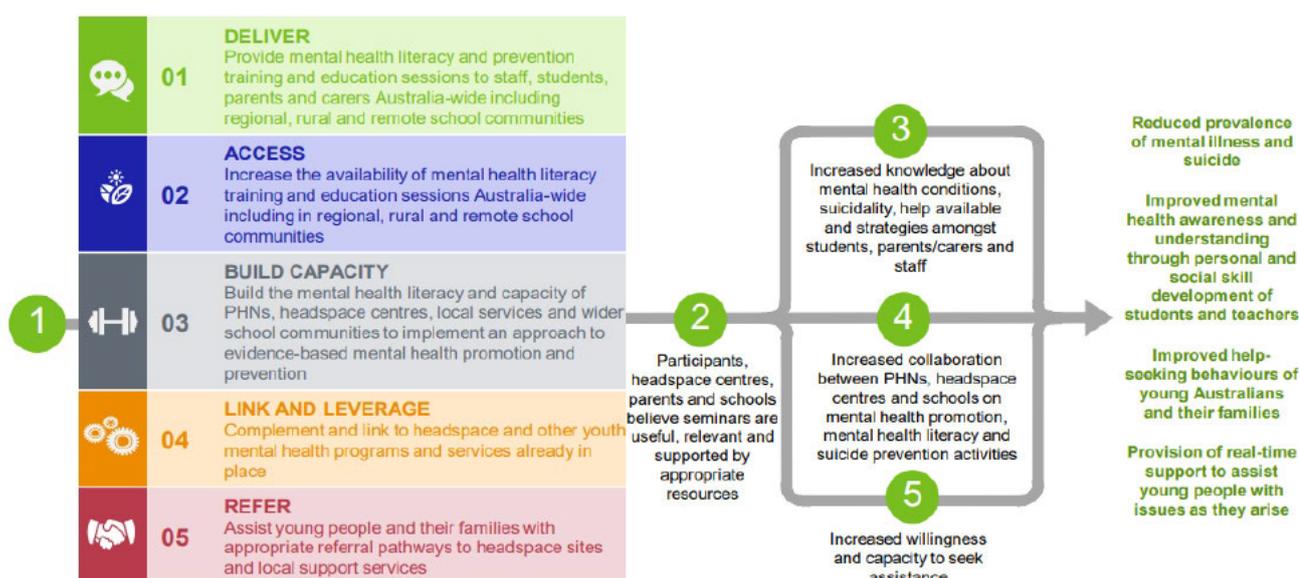
The Mental Health Education Program seeks to lift mental health literacy and strengthen partnerships between schools and headspace centres. It comprises:

1. education sessions for secondary school students and their parents and/or carers;
2. presentations to representatives from schools, education departments, PHNs and headspace Centres.

With a focus on schools in rural, regional and remote communities, these free workshops are facilitated onsite at schools (and/or via webinar during COVID-19). Sessions for students are designed to fit with the school day (in a standard lesson).

The Mental Health Education Program is complementary to Be You and is targeted at educators. It is focused on supporting teachers in schools to promote and protect positive mental health in children and young people.

Program objectives



In 2021-22:

1,419 workshops conducted

313 schools engaged

58,821 school students reached

“What a fantastic way to finish the term...students were able to recognise ways their body reacts to stress and strategies to help them stand strong as well as exploring who they can talk to and where to seek help. We thank headspace for providing these beneficial workshops to our students.”

our workshops



Let's Talk About It:
Mental Health



Looking Out for Your
Friends: Notice, Ask,
Connect



Standing Strong:
Bullying and Mental
Health



Transitions: Primary to
Secondary



Transitions: Leaving
School



Self-Care: Looking after
your Mental Health



Naming and
understanding Our
Emotions



Parent/Carer workshop
Supporting young
people: Notice, Ask,
Connect

For more information about the
program or to book sessions, please
contact us at: MHEP@headspace.org.au

The Mental Health Education Program is a Schools Suicide
Prevention Activities Initiative, headspace Schools, funded by the
Australian Government

learning outcomes

- Understanding mental health and wellbeing
- Break down stigma about mental health
- Manage our stress buckets
- Ways in which we can support ourselves

- Notice: how to identify warning signs that a friend might be going through a tough time
- Ask: how to have difficult conversations and ask your friend if they are OK
- Connect: how to help your friend access support
- Strategies for looking after your own wellbeing

- Identify the ways your body and brain react to stress
- Review bullying's impact on mental health
- Find spaces and activities to help you stand strong
- Explore who you can talk to and seek support

- Understand how transition and change can impact mental health
- How to manage stress from change
- Build resilience and healthy coping skills
- Strengthen connection and belonging

- How change and transitions can impact our mental health
- Common responses and concerns with leaving school
- Strategies to support yourselves and each other during the transition out of school
- Support that can help you with the transition

- Understand mental health and the importance of looking after ourselves
- Understand what self-care is and ways to do it
- Build a healthy headspace action plan
- Identify where, when, and how to seek additional support

- Identifying and naming our emotions
- Understanding the purpose of emotions
- Understanding the relationship between feelings, thoughts, and emotions

- Understand mental health and wellbeing in young people
- Notice changes that a young person might be going through a tough time
- Identify strategies to connect and communicate with young people
- Increase knowledge about how to support a young person and where to access professional support

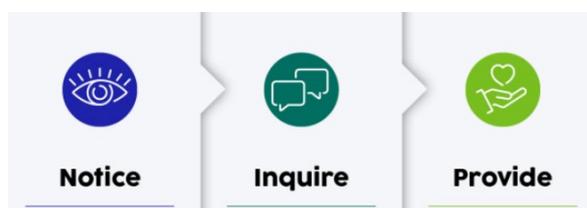
Attachment 2:

NIP it in the bud program information

NIP it in the bud! provides a whole school approach to recognising and responding to early warning signs of depression, anxiety, and emotional distress communicated through self-harm. It is founded on a range of evidence-based child and adolescent mental health resources and aims to provide schools and families with the right information and approach to optimise wellbeing and minimise risks for children and young people within the school setting.

There is also a toolkit of resources available to help the whole school community apply the *NIP it in the bud!* early intervention approach. It includes a range of tip sheets, mapping tools, individual plans, brief intervention kits and supporting resources.

What does *NIP it in the bud* stand for?



Notice changes in mood and behaviour that may indicate a young person is finding it hard to manage mental health challenges.

Have you noticed changes in someone's behaviour or your own? Perhaps experiencing feelings of anger, sadness or difficulty focusing or getting good quality sleep. Withdrawing from friends or activities, can be signs of emerging mental health difficulties that may need some extra support.

Inquire - sensitively and competently about the young person's experiences.

This is the time to have a conversation, ask your friend or young person (or yourself) what is going on that may be affecting the behaviour? It's important we take this time to listen and understand what's going on.



Provide - support or referrals to young people. The final step is to provide support; through the inquiry step you may have an idea of what further support may be needed. It could be:

- brainstorming some ideas together on how to ease stress or manage the particular situation
- looking up and reading some online articles
- talking to a teacher, school counselor or family member
- reaching out to a professional mental health service, like your local headspace centre or eheadspace.