



The Effectiveness of Student Wellbeing Programs and Services



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Auditor-General

The Effectiveness of Student Wellbeing Programs and Services

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The Hon. Robert Smith MLC
President
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Melbourne

The Hon. Jenny Lindell MP
Speaker
Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
Melbourne

Dear Presiding Officers

Under the provisions of section 16AB of the *Audit Act 1994*, I transmit my performance report on *The Effectiveness of Student Wellbeing Programs and Services*.

Yours faithfully



DR PETER FROST
Acting Auditor-General

3 February 2010

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Audit summary

Introduction

Student wellbeing affects most aspects of students' functioning at school and is an important factor that affects learning and development outcomes. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) has defined student wellbeing as '*...a sustainable positive mood and attitude, health, resilience, and satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences at school*'. While wellbeing is critical to student development and success, it is difficult to clearly define and determine how much various factors affect it.

DEECD has a long history of providing student wellbeing programs and services, guided by a range of policy and planning documents. In 2009–10, DEECD budgeted \$116.3 million for student wellbeing programs and services. Schools also plan, fund and deliver a range of student wellbeing programs and services.

Student wellbeing programs and services can be broadly categorised as professional support, including psychologists, youth workers and social workers, nursing, and other health and welfare related staff.

The objective of this audit was to assess whether DEECD's student wellbeing programs and services are effective. We assessed three major programs and services—Student Support Services Program (SSSP), Primary Welfare Officer Initiative (PWOI) and Secondary School Nursing Program (SSNP). The audit covered DEECD's central office, three regional offices and two case study schools.

Conclusions

While DEECD's performance data indicates that student wellbeing is improving overall, it has only recently commenced actions to determine the effectiveness of its programs and services on student wellbeing. Particular gaps we found that are now being addressed by DEECD are:

- the lack of a comprehensive and up-to-date overarching policy framework for student wellbeing
- inadequate measurement of the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services.

No clear and current overarching policy framework for student wellbeing

Multiple stakeholders deliver DEECD's student wellbeing programs and services. In this complex operational environment, it is important that the main stakeholders for each program and service share a common vision of student wellbeing.

DEECD's 1998 Framework for Student Support Services sets out its key policies and principles, accountability measures and targets for student wellbeing. However, it does not constitute a comprehensive and up-to-date, overarching framework that links DEECD's current student wellbeing objectives with the goals and objectives of related programs and services, and the expected outcomes for student wellbeing. Moreover, there is no single document that integrates all of DEECD's student wellbeing programs and services and shows how, for example, school nurses, student welfare coordinators and student support service officers align with other wellbeing staff in schools.

A sound policy framework should also include a process of continuous improvement. A substantial amount of wellbeing-related survey data is collected from students, parents and school staff. However, there is no evidence that this data, or the results of program and service evaluations, is being used to drive a planned and systematic program of continuous improvement. There is also scope for research and best practice to be shared more effectively across regions, including information about what is and is not working in schools.

Inadequate measurement of the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services

The main sources of data on student wellbeing are the Attitudes to School Survey (ATSS), and attendance data collected from schools.

The results from the ATSS indicate that student wellbeing has improved between 2006 and 2009. It also shows that primary school students have a higher level of wellbeing than secondary students, and that the gap between the two school types has remained around the same level over the four-year period for which comparative data was available. Our analysis also revealed that wellbeing declines as a cohort moves from the primary school system into and through the secondary school system. While these situations may be expected, DEECD needs to monitor wellbeing levels between schools and explore opportunities for redressing any gaps.

There has been no significant change in attendance rates between 2006 and 2008, with average attendance remaining constant at about 92 per cent. However, mean absent days per student increased marginally between 2006 and 2008.

DEECD has not established a link between the ATSS results or attendance data, and the student wellbeing programs and services being delivered. Further, the limited number of targets or benchmarks makes it difficult to determine whether the results achieved in student wellbeing, and more specifically student wellbeing programs and services, are meeting DEECD's expectations, and are providing value for money.

While the *State of Victoria's Children* report is not designed to measure the effectiveness of DEECD's programs and services, it provides a source of information upon which to base the planning of programs and services. However, it is difficult to draw a clear conclusion about student wellbeing from the data presented in the report as some indicators show improvement while others show negative trends.

Without robust data on program and service effectiveness it is hard to determine whether student wellbeing trends are the result of planned activities, other external influences, or general population trends. The lack of such data also undermines the reliability of decisions on resource allocations.

Planned improvements to DEECD's outcomes and evaluation processes

More positively, DEECD is undertaking extensive work in three areas that can help measure the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services:

- **Health and Wellbeing Service Framework (HWSF)**—The HWSF will include a set of agreed measurable outcomes for program and service performance.
- **Outcomes and Evaluation Framework**—DEECD has recently developed this framework to better measure whether it is achieving its outcomes and goals.
- **Student Support Services Program (SSSP)**—Planned revisions to the SSSP include introducing new accountability and performance reporting arrangements that will include impact and service provision data. DEECD plans to roll out these new arrangements in 2010, however, for one region we visited there is a risk that service delivery demands may prevent it from delivering the planned service revisions as intended and within the required time frames.
- **Secondary School Nursing Program (SSNP)**—DEECD has commenced implementation of the recommendations from the 2009 review of the SSNP. This includes strategies to strengthen the quality, delivery and management of the program.

Given the extensive resources allocated annually to improving student wellbeing, DEECD needs to implement and purposely drive these frameworks and service revisions.

Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Page
	DEECD should:	
1.	Include in its Health and Wellbeing Service Framework: • clearly defined overall student health and wellbeing outcomes • descriptions of how programs and services relate to and affect each other, and how their delivery across relevant agencies will be coordinated.	10
2.	Apply its Outcomes and Evaluation Framework to monitor, evaluate and review the effectiveness of its student wellbeing programs and services, and drive continuous improvement.	23
3.	Continue to actively monitor the differences in wellbeing levels across all primary and secondary schools and explore opportunities to redress the gaps between schools, including identifying and disseminating better practices adopted by schools.	23

Audit Act 1994 section 16— submissions and comments

Introduction

In accordance with section 16(3) of the *Audit Act 1994* a copy of this report, or relevant extracts from the report, was provided to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development with a request for comments or submissions.

The comments and submissions provided are not subject to audit nor the evidentiary standards required to reach an audit conclusion. Responsibility for the accuracy, fairness and balance of those comments rests solely with the agency head.

Submissions and comments received

RESPONSE provided by the Acting Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

The following is an extract of the response provided by the Acting Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). The full response is provided in Appendix B of this report.

Recommendation 1 – DEECD should include in its Health and Wellbeing Service Framework:

- clearly defined overall student health and wellbeing outcomes
- descriptions of how programs and services relate to and affect each other, and how their delivery across relevant agencies will be coordinated.

Response: *This recommendation is accepted. As the report indicates, DEECD is developing this framework that will include a set of agreed measurable outcomes that will be drawn from the outcomes and indicators already set out in the Victorian Child and Adolescent Outcomes Framework. This will enable each program and service to account for their performance and will support an integrated approach to service delivery. The Framework, which will include student health and wellbeing outcomes, is due for completion in 2010.*

RESPONSE provided by the Acting Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) – continued

Recommendation 2 – DEECD should apply its Outcomes and Evaluation Framework to monitor, evaluate and review the effectiveness of its student wellbeing programs and services, and drive continuous improvement.

Response: This recommendation is accepted. As the report indicates, DEECD has recently developed an outcomes and evaluation framework to better measure its progress towards achieving its outcomes and goals. This framework has been subject to audit by the Auditor General's office in the performance audit examining Performance Reporting Across Government which is forthcoming. DEECD's progressive implementation of this framework will include application to student wellbeing programs and services.

Recommendation 3 – DEECD should continue to actively monitor the difference in wellbeing levels across all primary and secondary schools and explore opportunities to redress the gaps between schools, including identifying and disseminating better practices adopted by schools.

Response: The recommendation is accepted. Differences in wellbeing levels identified by the audit report are, however, considered by DEECD to be expected across student year levels and reflect normal pathways for adolescent development. The Department's Attitudes to School Survey (ATSS) will however continue to be used to monitor wellbeing levels over time. DEECD will continue to explore opportunities for service system coordination and improvements that will make better use of the existing resources and redress gaps between schools, while providing a basis for identifying and disseminating better practices to be adopted by schools.

The findings and recommendations of the audit report can be expected to provide a basis for DEECD to drive improvement in student health and wellbeing services and programs. However, DEECD makes the following comments on the specific finding that 'Service delivery demands (on the student support services program) may prevent some regions from delivering the planned service revisions and or within the required time frames' (Section 2.4.2 of the VAGO Report).

DEECD believes this finding is at odds with feedback received through the regional forums and the data collection process established for the Program.

DEECD acknowledges that there are high service demands for student support services across the state. However, the Department's Student Wellbeing Division, together with Regional Student Support Services Coordinators, have established an effective mechanism for planning, monitoring and reviewing implementation of the new service delivery model through the monthly Statewide Student Support Services Coordination forum where regions routinely report progress in implementing the reforms and any issues or potential barriers are raised and addressed. Feedback from this forum indicates the Program is on track in meeting all its key project milestones. In addition, data from the student support services interim reporting process provides direct evidence that the service delivery model including school referral to the service and multidisciplinary service delivery is in place at the school level.

1 Background

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 What is student wellbeing?

Young people's wellbeing is a reflection of how connected they feel to their family, school and community. Although family is vital to young people's wellbeing, both the school and community environment play an important role in developing mental and physical health. For some young people the school environment can engender feelings of friendship, safety and connectedness, while for others it can present an isolated struggle that can stop them achieving their full potential.

The main elements of wellbeing are:¹

- mental—what I think about myself
- emotional—how I react to situations
- physical—how well am I
- spiritual—what I believe
- social—how I relate to others.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) has defined student wellbeing as:

'...a sustainable positive mood and attitude, health, resilience, and satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences at school.'

Student wellbeing affects most aspects of students functioning at school and, in the context of this audit, refers to the aspects of a young person's wellbeing that schools can reasonably be expected to have an impact on and take responsibility for.

1.1.2 Student wellbeing policy

The government's *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*, launched in 2008, outlined its school reform agenda to improve outcomes, including wellbeing outcomes for all Victorian children and young people. The blueprint had a particular focus on improving outcomes for disadvantaged children, including Koorie children and children from low socio-economic backgrounds. Figure 1A shows how major policy and planning documents articulate DEECD's vision for student wellbeing.

¹Masters, G.N., Australian Council for Educational Research, Student wellbeing conference 2004, *Conceptualising and Researching Student Wellbeing*, 2004, p.2.

Figure 1A
Student wellbeing—major policy and planning documents

Policy/planning document	Student wellbeing summary
Growing Victoria Together (GVT)	Outlines the government's long-term vision and goals, which include providing high-quality education and training for lifelong learning. One of the main indicators outlined in GVT is that the wellbeing of young people will improve.
DEECD Corporate Plan	DEECD's vision is that every young Victorian thrives, learns and grows, enjoying a productive, rewarding and fulfilling life, while contributing to their local and global communities. The learning, development, health and wellbeing of all young Victorians, from birth to adulthood are central to DEECD's operations.
Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development	Outlines a five-year reform agenda for the education and early childhood development sector. It contains three major strategies that impact on student wellbeing: • system improvement • partnerships with parents and community • building a stronger workforce. These strategies outline planned student wellbeing improvements and articulate the complex service system needed to support improved student outcomes.
The Victorian Child and Adolescent Outcomes Framework	Establishes the government's outcomes for Victoria's children, including aspects of safety, health, development, learning and wellbeing.
Accountability and Improvement Framework for Victorian Government Schools (AIF)	Establishes key accountability areas for DEECD's central office, regional offices and schools. The AIF identifies student engagement and wellbeing as a main area of accountability for government schools.
Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools (FSSS)	Developed in 1998 in response to the Victorian Suicide Prevention Task Force report, it outlines the delivery framework for a range of student support services. The FSSS includes a student wellbeing policy, which states that students are better prepared for learning when they are healthy, safe and happy; therefore, student welfare is the responsibility of all staff working in a whole school context.
Safe Schools are Effective Schools Strategy—a resource for developing safe and supportive school environments	Outlines DEECD's commitment to safe, secure and stimulating environment for all students. The strategy aims to promote positive student behaviour, prevent anti-social behaviour, such as bullying, and encourage respect, compassion and cooperation.
Effective Schools are Engaging Schools—Student Engagement Policy Guidelines	Designed to support schools and create a positive school culture where students and teachers share a collective responsibility for the learning and wellbeing of children and young people in our communities. The policy seeks to outline processes, actions and consequences for student engagement and disengagement.

Note: There are a number of lower-level program and service guidelines and standards, which support these major policy initiatives.

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

1.2 Student wellbeing programs and services

DEECD has identified that student wellbeing is strongly influenced by their learning experiences in the classroom and their overall experiences of teaching and learning—*teacher effectiveness, teacher empathy and stimulating learning*. On this basis, it has placed a strong emphasis on improving student wellbeing by improving teacher effectiveness and empathy, and creating a stimulating learning environment.

In addition to this whole-of-school focus, DEECD also runs various specific health and wellbeing services, including some transferred from the former Department of Human Services. Figure 1B shows the main student wellbeing programs and services.

Figure 1B
Student wellbeing programs and services that DEECD funds

Program	Funding 2009–10 (\$mil)
Budget Paper 3 Output Group—Services to students	
Investment in student welfare and support	92.4(a)
Student Support Services Program (SSSP) Established to help vulnerable students by giving them access to student support services staff. These staff comprise psychologists, guidance officers, speech pathologists, social workers and visiting teachers. DEECD administers the SSSP through its nine regional offices.	59.9
Primary Welfare Officers Initiative (PWOI) Established to assist schools' ability to support students at risk of disengagement who are not achieving their educational potential. Approximately one-third of schools teaching primary aged children receive PWOI funding on a needs basis. Schools administer the PWOI and select staff to meet their needs from professionals, including teaching staff, social workers, nurses, counsellors and psychologists.	20.3
Student Welfare Coordinators Initiative (SWCI) Established to help students handle issues, such as truancy, bullying, drug use and depression. DEECD provides funding for all government secondary schools to employ student welfare coordinators. Schools administer SWCI.	12.2
Budget Paper 3 Output Group—Child health and support services	13.8(b)
School Focused Youth Service (SFYS) Established in response to the Victorian Government Suicide Prevention Taskforce. DEECD funds local government, community health and youth service organisations to manage the program, which support children and young people who are vulnerable and at risk of disengagement from school.	7.0
Primary School Nursing Program (PSNP) The PSNP is offered to all children attending primary and English Language Centre schools in Victoria. The aim of the program is to provide all Victorian children the opportunity to have a health assessment, to link children, families and school communities to services available in the community, and to provide information and advice that promotes health and wellbeing.	6.8

Figure 1B
Student wellbeing programs and services that DEECD funds – continued

Program	Funding 2009–10 (\$mil)
Budget Paper 3 Output Group—Adolescent health services (schools)	10.1
Secondary School Nursing Program (SSNP)	10.1
The SSNP aims to improve the health and wellbeing of young people, reduce negative outcomes, and minimise risk-taking behaviour. DEECD funds the employment of 100 nurses across 199 schools, which is administered through its nine regional offices.	
Total	116.3

Note: (a) Investment in student welfare and support funding for 2009–10 was \$124.7 million, which includes \$32.3 million in student resource package funding line items for middle years' equity, secondary equity and mobility. These are not programs as such, but items under which schools can receive funding. This funding has not been included in this Figure.

Note: (b) Child health and support services funding for 2009–10 was \$98.6 million. This includes funding for community-based maternal and child health services available to all families with children aged 0 to 6 years, which has not been included in this Figure.

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office using DEECD information.

In addition to the programs and services that DEECD funds directly, schools independently plan, fund and deliver a range of student wellbeing programs and services. Consequently, some schools employ student wellbeing staff directly from their own budget.

1.3 Conduct of audit

1.3.1 Audit objectives

This audit assessed whether DEECD's student wellbeing programs and services are effective. Specifically, we examined the:

- comprehensiveness of DEECD's planning and implementation of the programs and services
- robustness of DEECD's data collection and analysis of the programs and services
- impact of DEECD's programs and services on student wellbeing.

1.3.2 Scope

The audit examined DEECD's central and three regional offices, as well as the application of student wellbeing programs and services in two schools.

We assessed three key student wellbeing programs and services—SSSP, PWOI and SSNP.

1.3.3 Cost of the audit

The audit was performed in accordance with the Australian Auditing Standards applicable to performance audits. The total cost of the audit was \$320 000 and included staff time, overheads, expert advice and printing.

2 Delivery framework for student wellbeing programs and services

At a glance

Background

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) funds various health and wellbeing services across approximately 1 500 schools, including six major student wellbeing programs and services that DEECD regional offices and schools deliver.

Findings

- There is no clear and current, overarching framework defining the overall objectives for student wellbeing and linking them with the objectives of individual programs and services.
- DEECD's central office, the three regional offices and two schools we visited, did not have a shared understanding of the main elements of student wellbeing, reinforcing the need for an overarching framework.
- There was strong evidence and a clear need for the three student wellbeing programs and services we examined.
- Student wellbeing data and the results of program evaluations are not used to drive a planned and systematic program of continuous improvement.
- Funds allocated to schools for the Secondary School Nursing Program (SSNP) have not been reviewed since it started in 2000, raising questions about the ongoing appropriateness of the allocations. DEECD has started planning to address the findings of its 2009 review of the SSNP including dealing with this issue.

Recommendation

DEECD should include in its Health and Wellbeing Service Framework:

- clearly defined overall student health and wellbeing outcomes
- descriptions of how programs and services relate to and affect each other, and how their delivery across relevant agencies will be coordinated.

2.1 Introduction

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) administers a range of interconnected student health and wellbeing programs and services across 1 587 schools. These programs and services also affect the health, learning, development, and economic and social outcomes of children and young people in their future years. Consequently, the planning and implementation of student wellbeing programs and services is an important task and requires a clear and focused policy framework to facilitate their efficient and effective delivery.

In this chapter, we examine whether:

- DEECD has a framework or policy that clearly defines its approach to, and objectives for, student wellbeing
- there is a sound evidentiary basis for the student wellbeing programs and services
- programs and services are regularly monitored and evaluated for ongoing relevance and appropriateness
- communication with schools about available programs and services is timely and comprehensive
- resource allocation criteria enables resources to be targeted towards areas of greatest need.

2.2 Policy framework

Under DEECD’s Accountability and Improvement Framework for Victorian government schools (AIF), its central and regional offices, and schools are collectively responsible for improving student outcomes. The roles of each office and schools are detailed in Figure 2A.

Figure 2A
DEECD’s roles and responsibilities—student outcomes

System level	Responsibility
Central office	Accountable to government and the community for the overall performance of the system and for establishing appropriate policies and frameworks that can support sustained improvement in schools.
Regional offices	Responsible for overseeing the performance of their school's, effective provision planning, resource distribution and support.
Schools	Responsible for student achievements, for providing high-quality education programs, for the ongoing health and sustainability of their school and for the provision of equity and quality in programs.

Source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Accountability Framework for Victorian Government Schools.

Student wellbeing services are delivered and monitored in line with the AIF.

Under the service delivery model, multiple stakeholders deliver separate but linked programs and services. For DEECD's central office to acquit its responsibilities under the AIF it should have established a strategic framework with clear overall student wellbeing policy objectives that are linked to the objectives of the individual student wellbeing programs and services. This has not been achieved.

DEECD's policy document, *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development, Framework for Student Support Services (FSSS)*, the Student Wellbeing Division's Business Plan for 2009–10, and *Effective Schools are Engaging Schools* are the main documents guiding student wellbeing policies and practices. However, there is currently no single document that integrates the programs and services and shows how, for example, school nurses, student welfare coordinators and student support service officers align with other wellbeing staff in schools.

DEECD's 1998 FSSS outlined a broad whole-of-school approach to student wellbeing, describing the principles, arrangements and additional resources provided to strengthen student welfare and support services. However, it does not cover the current range of services supporting schools or address the roles and relationships that exist between these services nor how they align. The FSSS does not cover a number of new programs and services established since 1998.

DEECD is developing a Health and Wellbeing Service Framework (HWSF) that will include a set of agreed measurable outcomes to allow each program and service to account for their performance. It intends to complete the HSWF in early 2010.

DEECD's central office, three regional offices and the two schools we visited had different views on what were the main elements of student wellbeing, although some common themes, such as safety and connectedness were identified. However, many of the main elements reflected the programs and processes that address student wellbeing rather than the conceptual understanding that underpins these programs. In other words, there is a difference between a conceptual understanding of student wellbeing—safety and connectedness; and a programmatic understanding—the programs, services, policies, protocols, processes and procedures that support wellbeing.

The variety of responses also illustrates that without a clear conceptual framework for student wellbeing, DEECD's central office, three regional offices and the two schools we visited have interpreted wellbeing in different ways. While this allows regional offices and schools the flexibility to target resources towards areas of specific need, it also has the potential for their actions to be inefficient or ineffective in achieving the desired wellbeing outcomes.

2.3 Development of programs and services

2.3.1 Evidence base

There was a strong evidence base and a clear need for the three student wellbeing programs and services we examined. The Student Support Services Program (SSSP) and the Primary Welfare Officer Initiative (PWOI) both sit under the FSSS, developed from the 1998 Victorian Suicide Prevention Taskforce recommendations.

The Secondary School Nursing Program (SSNP) arose from a 1999 election commitment to promote better health in schools and reduce increasingly prevalent health risks to young people, such as drug use, alcohol abuse, eating disorders and depression.

2.3.2 Objectives

Each of the programs examined had clearly defined objectives.

2.3.3 Consultation

Key stakeholders across government and in the community were extensively involved in the development of the three programs and services examined for the audit.

Stakeholder feedback also provided detailed input into how components of the revised service could best be implemented.

2.3.4 Reviews

While DEECD is reviewing and restructuring some of its student wellbeing programs and services, none of the original delivery models incorporated planned review processes, such as assessing the ongoing need for, and appropriateness of, the program or service.

DEECD has conducted large-scale, high-level reviews of student wellbeing programs and services since 2000; however, they were not part of a planned program of evaluations covering all programs and services. Nor did the review results form part of a planned and systematic approach to continuous improvement.

2.4 Resource allocations

Different resource allocation formulae are used to determine the level of funding for student wellbeing programs and services. Resource models include school level and regional factors, such as rates of disadvantage using the Student Family Occupation Index, rurality, and the proportion of students receiving an education maintenance allowance.

2.4.1 Secondary School Nursing Program

School funding allocations for the SSNP have not been reviewed since the program started in 2000, when schools were selected to participate according to their level of need and socioeconomic disadvantage. Since school needs and socioeconomic status may change, DEECD may not be directing enough resources to schools in greatest need.

DEECD has started planning to address the findings of its 2009 review of the SSNP, which includes developing strategies to strengthen the quality, delivery and management of the program.

2.4.2 Student Support Services Program

The planned revisions to the SSSP, in progress, will reorganise program staff into co-located, multi-disciplinary teams to increase service coordination and staff support. This is a major shift from the previous service delivery model, which allocated SSSP staff to schools annually. The three regional offices that we examined indicated that they were adopting this model progressively and in different ways. For example, while one region has taken the opportunity to examine their general service delivery model and identify opportunities for improvement, another indicated that they are so busy delivering services that they do not have time to spend planning and strategising. This suggests that service delivery demands may prevent some regions from delivering the planned service revisions as intended and or within the required time frames.

DEECD reviews SSSP funding allocations annually.

2.4.3 Primary Welfare Officers Initiative

Schools receive PWOI funding as part of their annual school budget. They are responsible for recruiting suitable people to fill these roles and for overseeing the work programs of their primary welfare officers (PWO). Schools also report to DEECD once a year on the role and utilisation of their PWO staff in an online survey. This devolved management approach allows schools to target their specific needs, while the online survey provides DEECD with the opportunity to identify inefficient or ineffective use of resources across the system.

DEECD reviews PWOI allocations on a four-year cycle.

2.5 Communication of program and service information

Across DEECD's regions and schools, there are various communication forums for student wellbeing staff and regional coordinators. These forums focus on professional development activities and addressing issues. Regional office and school staff we visited expressed high levels of support for these forums.

2.5.1 DEECD's central office

All three regional offices we visited acknowledged that communication from DEECD's central office to schools about the availability of student wellbeing programs and services is limited, particularly for the PWOI and the SSNP.

DEECD reviews of the PWOI and SSNP have recommended improving communication with schools to clarify the roles of service providers and the expectations of DEECD.

DEECD started developing a communications strategy for the SSNP in September 2009, with a completion target of December 2009. At the time of the audit, this was not available for review.

2.5.2 DEECD's regional offices

Regional office employees coordinate student wellbeing programs and services, support wellbeing staff in schools and work closely with schools to make sure that service delivery is efficient and effective. However, information sharing and collaboration between regions could be improved.

While student wellbeing professionals share information within regions and across periodic intra-regional forums, there is scope for regional office staff to play a more prominent role in assessing and disseminating current research and best practice, including information about what is and is not working in schools.

2.6 Conclusion

DEECD does not have a clear, and current, overarching framework defining its student wellbeing objectives and linking them with the goals and objectives of related programs and services. Further, there was not a common and agreed understanding across DEECD's central office, and three regional offices and two schools that we visited, which had differing views of what student wellbeing actually means.

Unless there is a clear understanding of how individual programs and services collectively contribute to improving student wellbeing, there is a risk that resources will not be used efficiently and effectively.

Recommendation

1. DEECD should include in its Health and Wellbeing Service Framework:
 - clearly defined overall student health and wellbeing outcomes
 - descriptions of how programs and services relate to and affect each other, and how their delivery across relevant agencies will be coordinated.
-

3 Measuring the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services

At a glance

Background

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's (DEECD) central and regional offices and schools have specific roles and responsibilities for measuring the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services. DEECD sources wellbeing data from the Attitudes to School Survey (ATSS), student attendances and the results of its evaluations. DEECD uses the *State of Victoria's Children* report for planning wellbeing programs and services.

Findings

- ATSS results show an improvement in wellbeing between 2006 and 2009 and that wellbeing generally decreases as students advance through school.
- While student attendances were relatively constant between 2006 and 2008, mean absent days increased slightly.
- Data presented in the 2008 *State of Victoria's Children* report that relates to student wellbeing is inconclusive because there is no clear pattern of improvement across the range of indicators.
- DEECD has not developed evidence-based descriptions that show how, and to what extent, achievement of the objectives of their programs and services will affect student wellbeing.
- With only limited targets or benchmarks, it is difficult to gauge whether the wellbeing results match expectations or represent value for money.
- Evaluations of student wellbeing programs and services did not establish whether they had a positive effect on student wellbeing.
- Successful implementation of the planned Outcomes and Evaluation Framework and other actions in train should improve measurement of student wellbeing program and service effectiveness.

Recommendations

DEECD should:

- Apply its Outcomes and Evaluation Framework to monitor, evaluate and review the effectiveness of its student wellbeing programs and services, and drive continuous improvement.
- Continue to actively monitor the differences in wellbeing levels across all primary and secondary schools and explore opportunities to redress the gaps between schools, including identifying and disseminating better practices adopted by schools.

3.1 Introduction

Figure 3A sets out the roles and responsibilities of DEECD's central and regional offices and schools for measuring the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services.

Figure 3A
Measurement responsibilities—student wellbeing

Organisation	Responsibility
Central office	Examine the effectiveness of particular programs and services in: • achieving stated program or service objectives • achieving DEECD's corporate objectives and student wellbeing policy outcomes • improving wellbeing across the state.
Regional offices	Assess how consistently and effectively programs and services are delivered by, and to, schools. Regions can also examine the collective effectiveness of programs and services across schools in their region.
Schools	Directly assess the effectiveness of programs and services in improving the wellbeing of their students.

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

In this chapter we examine whether:

- suitable criteria, including performance indicators, to measure student wellbeing and the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services, have been developed
- there has been an overall improvement in student wellbeing.

3.2 Student wellbeing: measures and results

Student wellbeing is hard to measure, because it is both difficult to define precisely and because it is multi-faceted. As such, it is difficult to directly attribute the impacts of specific programs and services to more general improvements in student wellbeing.

While a positive state of wellbeing is needed for each individual to thrive and ultimately succeed, it is difficult to isolate the specific influence of a wide range of factors, including the home and school environment on a person's wellbeing.

DEECD's primary sources of data about student wellbeing are its Attitudes to School Survey (ATSS) and attendance data collected from schools. It also uses wellbeing data from staff and parent opinion surveys, the Principal's Mid Year Supplementary Census and the *State of Victoria's Children* report. The *State of Victoria's Children* report is not designed to measure the effectiveness of DEECD's programs and services, rather it provides a source of information upon which to base the planning of programs and services.

3.2.1 Attitudes to School Survey

The ATSS is a survey of student opinion that covers the following wellbeing related measures:

- student morale
- student distress
- student safety
- perceptions of classroom behaviour
- connectedness to school.

Schools administer the ATSS to students from Year 5 to Year 12 and submit the results to DEECD's central office for analysis. DEECD benchmarks the school data and reports averages (mean scores) back to schools showing how they are performing against other schools. Data is presented as a series of charts showing how a school's overall mean scores and year group mean scores compare with other schools. While school and student participation in the survey is voluntary, response rates are generally high, 99 per cent of schools and 85 per cent of students participated in the survey in 2009.

DEECD's new school performance reporting system, *The Victorian Government School Performance Summary*, includes a school-level measure of student wellbeing based on aggregated results from the ATSS. This is not currently provided at a system wide level.

Analysis

Figure 3B shows the mean survey scores for primary and secondary schools across the five wellbeing measures for 2006 and 2009, and the percentage change in these scores.

Figure 3B
Student wellbeing measures—mean scores and variance, 2006–2009

School	Morale	Distress	Safety	Classroom behaviour	Student connectedness
Primary					
2006	5.44	5.53	4.02	2.81	4.14
2009	5.67	5.84	4.27	3.23	4.30
Change (%)	4.23	5.61	6.22	14.95	3.86
Secondary					
2006	4.65	4.80	3.96	2.70	3.38
2009	4.81	5.06	4.16	2.88	3.50
Change (%)	3.44	5.42	5.05	6.67	3.55

Note: In all measures, a higher score represents a more positive result. Mean scores for morale and distress have a maximum possible score of seven, and should not be directly compared with mean scores for the other three measures, which have a maximum possible score of five.

Note: Primary school results are represented by Years 5 and 6 students.

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office, analysis of DEECD's ATSS results from 2006 to 2009.

To the extent that the five ATSS measures directly reflect student wellbeing, the survey results indicate an improvement in student wellbeing between 2006 and 2009.

However, Figure 3B shows that aggregated mean scores for primary schools are higher than secondary school mean scores across every measure; and that the gap between the two school types has remained relatively constant over the four-year period.

Through further analysis of the detailed results, we identified that as student cohorts moved through year levels their mean scores for each measure generally decreased. For example, in 2006 the Year 7 cohort mean score for student morale was 5.06. As this group moved into Year 8 in 2007, the mean score dropped to 4.84, then to 4.79 in 2008 and to 4.74 in 2009. The reasons for this drop warrants further investigation by DEECD.

Further details about the ATSS results for the five wellbeing measures are in Appendix A.

Data limitations

DEECD has made limited use of the ATSS data which has restricted its usefulness for measuring wellbeing and the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services, namely:

- **A lack of connectivity with programs and services**—DEECD has not established a link between the ATSS data and student wellbeing programs and services. Therefore, it is not possible to identify what impact programs and services have had on each measure, or on student wellbeing overall.
- **A lack of targets**—Only one measure in the survey is supported by targets. Budget Paper No.3 of the Victorian State Budget details two targets for student connectedness to school. Reports provided to schools show their performance relative to other schools, but not against an expected level of performance.
- **Data is available only from 2006 onwards**—Because of changes to the administration of the survey, results before 2006 are not comparable with those from 2006 onwards.

3.2.2 School attendance data

DEECD collects data on student absence rates at all schools. This is reported at the school level as the average number of days absent per student. DEECD uses absence data to establish attendance rates at the whole-of-government-school-system level. These 'inferred' attendance rates are reported as one of the main output performance measures in DEECD's annual report and in Budget Paper No.3. Such reporting is in accordance with the Australian Government's practice to enable national comparability.

The standard definition of absences reported in government schools only includes non-curriculum related absences. Non-curriculum absences include those related to health/illness and parental choice, for example family holidays and religious ceremonies. DEECD uses full time equivalent (FTE) numbers to report absence data, rather than student headcount data.

Analysis

Attendance data presented in DEECD's annual reports does not indicate any significant change in attendance rates between 2006 and 2008, with average attendance remaining constant at about 92 per cent.

However, mean absent days per student increased between 2006 and 2008, from 13.2 days to 13.7 days across primary schools and from 16.2 days to 17.0 days across secondary schools. If the number of days absent is treated as an indicator of student wellbeing, then this indicates that student wellbeing has not improved and may, on average, be declining across Victoria.

As with the ATSS data, absence/attendance data shows a clear gap between primary and secondary schools.

Data limitations

DEECD presents attendance data in its annual report and in Budget Paper No. 3, as a percentage of school days, rounded to a whole number. Using attendance rates in this way introduces a potential risk that trends may not be clearly identified.

3.2.3 The State of Victoria's Children 2008 report

The State of Victoria's Children 2008 report is a whole-of-government report on outcomes for children and young people. It is based on the Victorian Child and Adolescent Outcomes Framework.

The report incorporates a broad suite of measures relating to the health, wellbeing, development, learning and safety of all children aged 0 to 17 in Victoria. It has a focus on monitoring the outcomes for priority population groups such as Indigenous children, refugee children, children with disabilities, children in out-of-home care and with chronic disadvantage.

The State of Victoria's Children 2008 report outlines 35 outcomes of health, safety, learning, development and wellbeing with 150 indicators identified to quantify these outcomes. As set out in the Victorian Child and Adolescent Outcomes Framework, the outcomes also consider the influence of family and community, and the supports and services in the wider society. The report is not intended to provide detailed explanations of patterns observed across the 150 indicators, rather it is intended to present a comprehensive picture of outcomes for children and flag issues that warrant further investigation.

Government agencies use the indicators in the report as an evidence base for reviewing the outcomes of the government's policies and strategic initiatives. The indicators are gathered from a range of data sources including expert papers, Australian Bureau of Statistics data, and data from a number of government departments. The report is divided into five main sections, all of which have some relation to student wellbeing:

- physical health
- staying healthy and healthy lifestyles
- safety
- development and learning
- happiness and engagement with families and communities.

Analysis

The data presented in the report is difficult to interpret in terms of trends in student wellbeing as some indicators show improvement while others show negative trends.

Physical health

Schools have only a limited capacity to influence the physical health of their students. While the report contained a few indicators of physical health relevant to student wellbeing, those included in the report were missing critical data. For example, the report identified that 31.1 per cent of students in Years 6 and 8 were either overweight or obese in 2006. However, the report did not include current or historical comparators for this indicator, nor did it include reliable recent data for older students. Data on the incidence of Type 2 Diabetes in children, a key indicator of physical health, is also not available.

Staying healthy and healthy lifestyles

Student wellbeing programs and services have the potential to have a positive impact on student lifestyles.

The report contained a number of health lifestyle indicators relevant to student wellbeing. While performance against some of these indicators, such as tobacco use, improved, others, such as alcohol consumption, fell. The incidence of self-harm hospitalisation (per 100 000 people) among young people aged 12–24 also increased from 138.2 in 1996–97 to 197.2 in 2005–06.

Safety

The report states that '*a secure and safe physical environment is critical to the emotional wellbeing and healthy development of children*'.

The report indicated that in 2006, 37.5 per cent of students experienced bullying and 19.4 per cent took part in bullying. DEECD does not have current or historical comparators for this indicator. The report also uses the ATSS measure for student safety as a proxy measure for bullying and notes that students were feeling increasingly safe between 2003 and 2007. However, it does not indicate how significant this result is, or explain what factors have contributed to it.

Another safety indicator, children and young people as offenders, showed that the number of young alleged offenders' (aged 10–17) that police processed increased by 4 per cent from 32.5 thousand in 2002–03 to 33.9 thousand in 2007–08.

Development and learning

A student's mental and physical state of wellbeing may affect their ability to learn and develop. Attendance and completion rates are key indicators of a student's connectedness to school and willingness to learn.

The report includes a number of indicators relating to development and learning, which showed broadly positive results. For example, attendance rates remained 'broadly stable' in Prep to Year 9 and have shown small increases in Years 10, 11 and 12. There has also been a slight increase in the number of students completing Year 12 or its equivalent.

Happiness and engagement with families and communities

Student wellbeing is closely associated with their sense of happiness and connectedness to their peers, school and community.

The indicators relating to this outcome area were largely positive. For example, in 2006 the majority of students 'almost always' or 'often' enjoyed school and the ATSS results from 2006 to 2007 showed that connectedness scores were generally higher among younger students.

3.3 Wellbeing programs and services: measures and results

It is important to establish a strong connection between the objectives of each student wellbeing program or service and the impact it is expected to have on student wellbeing. In other words, there needs to be an evidence-based description of the program that shows how, and to what extent, the achievement of the program's objectives will affect student wellbeing. For example, this could be done by outlining program logic, which is a systematic, visual way to present a planned program with its underlying assumptions and theoretical framework.

The three student wellbeing programs and services reviewed were based on sound evidence and an identified need, and had clear objectives. However, the extent to which the objectives have been achieved is not adequately measured.

For example, the Student Support Services Program (SSSP) objectives are:

- increasing access to services
- improving continuity of care
- developing partnerships and
- providing a greater focus on primary and early intervention.

However, performance of the SSSP is measured only in terms of utilisation of SSSP staff and demand for services.

Planned revisions to the SSSP include new accountability and performance reporting arrangements to 'establish a data collection and reporting system that captures service delivery and performance data'. These changes will include data on the efficiency of service provision and effectiveness of the program. DEECD started collecting interim service provision data, covering demand, volume and activity in April 2009 and plans to roll out its new accountability and performance reporting arrangements in 2010.

3.3.1 Results of DEECD's own program and service reviews

DEECD periodically evaluates programs and services to determine how effectively schools and regions are delivering them. The evaluations we reviewed showed problems with DEECD's measurement processes and data collection systems.

As DEECD does not rigorously evaluate whether its student wellbeing programs and services are achieving their objectives, only limited data is available regarding their effectiveness. For the programs and services, we examined:

- **Student Support Services Program (SSSP)**—DEECD's discussion paper—*Strengthening Student Support Services* indicated that Student Support Services Officers are recognised as a key resource and that there are opportunities to improve the delivery of the SSSP. Neither this discussion paper, nor the subsequent 'Directions' paper indicated whether the SSSP had achieved its objectives. *The Principals' Mid Year Supplementary Census*, conducted by DEECD showed high ongoing levels of satisfaction with the SSSP. For example, in 2009, 97.4 per cent of schools used the SSSP in the first-half of 2009 with about 80 per cent of schools being either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied'.
- **Primary Welfare Officer Initiative (PWOI)**—DEECD's 2006 review of the PWOI found that the program had helped schools to support at-risk students and their families, and that immediate impacts are being realised at both the school level and for individual students. The same review, however, also identified that the PWOI had not had any significant impact on its objectives of improving student attendance and achievements.

- **Secondary School Nursing Program (SSNP)**—DEECD's 2008–09 review of the SSNP showed that schools and community stakeholders value the contribution the program makes to the health and wellbeing of students in vulnerable schools. The review did not assess the SSNP's impact on student wellbeing; however, it did note that school nurses periodically evaluate the effectiveness of programs run in schools at a local level.

3.3.2 DEECD's Outcomes and Evaluation Framework

DEECD has recently developed an Outcomes and Evaluation Framework to better measure its progress towards achieving its outcomes and goals. The framework links key departmental initiatives to corporate priorities and strategies and ultimately to the outcomes and goals identified in DEECD's policy documents—the *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*. DEECD is progressively implementing this framework.

If successfully implemented, the framework, which includes an annual review process, should allow DEECD to achieve a more structured overview of its activities and help it better understand how programs and services affect student wellbeing outcomes.

In line with DEECD's focus on outcomes, all of its regions are currently transitioning from a program-based to an outcomes-based service delivery model for student wellbeing. Under the program-based model, evaluations focus on identifying the level of satisfaction with programs and services, whereas the outcomes-based model seeks to evaluate the impact of these activities on student wellbeing. This has implications for the data the regions collect, analyse and use.

All of the three regions audited were at different stages of reviewing how they evaluate the effectiveness of wellbeing programs and services:

- Region 1 does not use data to inform planning because they don't have the resources to analyse and use it.
- Region 2 regularly makes use of a range of student wellbeing data.
- Region 3 has taken data use a step further and has conducted an audit to identify what data is collected and why, and used the audit results to inform its planning.

School performance linkages map

In 2008, DEECD conducted a mapping exercise—the School Performance Linkages Map—to look at relationships between its various measures of school performance. The School Performance Linkages Map showed that at the school level, students' wellbeing is strongly influenced by their experiences of teaching and learning, peer relations and student behaviour. However, the School Performance Linkages Map does not correlate the impact of individual programs and services on student outcomes.

3.4 School case studies: measures and results

The audit examined two secondary schools with contrasting student wellbeing performance to understand the main factors that influenced those results.

Overall findings

While both schools have developed policies and practices to improve student wellbeing, it is clear that School one has implemented these strategies more effectively than School two. School one had a strong cohesive student wellbeing team with a clear plan and objective, which has allowed it to integrate student wellbeing into the everyday life of everyone in the school. The student wellbeing team in School two is more disjointed and does not have a clear, shared vision for student wellbeing. This has prevented the school from delivering its student wellbeing services in an efficient and effective way.

3.4.1 Student Attitudes to School Survey results

Figure 3C details the ATSS results for the two case study schools.

Figure 3C
School level Attitude to School Survey results—
mean scores for selected measures

School	Morale	Distress	Safety	Classroom behaviour	Connectedness
School one					
2006	4.59	4.82	4.00	2.69	3.40
2007	4.83	4.98	4.03	2.77	3.48
2008	5.15	5.19	4.17	3.03	3.82
2009	5.19	5.44	4.42	3.39	3.89
Four-year variation (%)	13.07	12.86	10.50	26.02	14.41
School two					
2006	4.59	4.84	3.91	2.65	3.28
2007	4.61	4.88	3.94	2.64	3.28
2008	4.37	4.73	3.89	2.75	3.1
2009	4.29	4.81	3.98	2.61	2.93
Four-year variation (%)	-6.54	-0.62	1.79	-1.51	-10.67

Note: In all measures, a higher score represents a more positive result.

Note: Mean scores for morale and distress have a maximum score of seven and are not comparable with mean scores for the other three measures, which have a maximum score of five. This is because student morale and distress were measured against a seven-point scale, while all other indicators were measured against a five-point scale.

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office, analysis of DEECD's ATSS results from 2006 to 2009.

As Figure 3C shows, the ATSS results for Schools one and two illustrate a very different student wellbeing scenario. In 2006, scores for both schools were similar across most indicators; however, from that point forward the results moved in opposite directions:

- Scores in School one increased by more than 10 per cent in each indicator, with the largest increase in the perceptions of classroom behaviour indicator.
- Scores in School two were static for three indicators and decreased in two others. The largest decrease was in the connectedness to school indicator.

3.4.2 School one

The ATSS results for School one in 2009 put it in the top 10 per cent of secondary schools for all measures. The school attributes its positive ATSS results to its coordinated and integrated approach to wellbeing. The key elements of this approach include:

- **Pastoral care**—having been involved in Beyond Blue research over a number of years and through the adoption and implementation of Mind Matters, a national mental health initiative for secondary schools, the school established its own pastoral care program in 2000. Since then it has worked to improve this program and to embed it deeply within the school culture and curriculum.
- **Strong supportive wellbeing team**—the student wellbeing staff at the school presented as a cohesive unit with clear, commonly understood objectives. For example, the whole student wellbeing team, across four campuses, is involved in developing the annual program of work for the school nurse who primarily covers only one campus.
- **Focus on prevention**—the school has adopted a proactive approach to preventing negative behaviour and outcomes. Students have set their own values and been involved in framing the attributes that distinguish the teacher values at the school.
- **Transition to secondary**—the school spends a lot of time helping Year 7 students to transition effectively into secondary school. They changed their teaching structure so Year 7 students spend the majority of their class time with only two teachers. The school then gradually increases the number of teachers that students encounter as they progress through the school.
- **Restorative practices**—the school has adopted an approach to dealing with bullying and other destructive behaviours that is based on cooperation, mutual understanding, and respect. This required a shift in philosophy from traditional punitive models of behaviour management to a model based on developing relationships and resolving issues. Under this model, teachers hold students accountable for their behaviour. The school considers this practice is effective.

3.4.3 School two

The 2009 ATSS results for School two put it in the bottom 16 per cent of secondary schools for all measures. The school is working with its local DEECD regional office to prevent these scores from falling further, but acknowledge that it may take some time to address all of the issues affecting these results. Figure 3D highlights the wellbeing issues that School two identified and the way it is addressing them.

Figure 3D
Student wellbeing issues in School two and its approaches to improving wellbeing

Student wellbeing issues	
Disjointed student wellbeing team	
The student wellbeing professionals at School two did not present as a cohesive unit. Not all members of the wellbeing team were involved in all aspects of the schools wellbeing services. While some members of the wellbeing team noted the high demand for services and the lack of resources to deliver them, others felt that they had capacity to assist in this function.	
Teacher skills	
The school has identified that its teaching staff do not have the skills to deal with the increasing incidence of difficult behaviour that students are presenting. This has hampered the schools efforts to integrate student wellbeing into the curriculum and has increased the volume of student issues that the wellbeing team must address.	
Crisis management	
The wellbeing team operate a triage system to deal with students who require additional support. However, they are prevented from adequately planning service delivery improvements due to the high incidence of crisis issues, such as drunkenness, homelessness and violence.	
Approaches to improving student wellbeing	
School-wide positive behaviour program	
The school has engaged in a three-year positive behaviour program in association with its regional office. The aims of this program are to:	
• establish a school environment where appropriate behaviour is the norm for all students • provide school communities with an effective, evidence-based approach to creating safe, positive and engaging school environments.	
Program to improve engagement	
The school has formed a subcommittee to address engagement. The subcommittee consulted with students, which resulted in the following recent activities:	
• improving equipment and recreation facilities • creating chill out areas • reducing break times to stop students from getting bored and misbehaving.	
Community engagement	
The school has identified a lack of community engagement and is working with its regional office to increase community involvement in the school.	

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

3.5 Conclusion

Although DEECD collects a substantial amount of wellbeing-related survey data from students, parents and school staff, this data is not used effectively to measure student wellbeing or to monitor the effectiveness of wellbeing programs and services. To this extent, DEECD cannot demonstrate whether its use of student wellbeing resources has been effective.

The ATSS data indicates that student wellbeing has improved from 2006 to 2009, which is a positive result. It also shows that primary school students have a higher level of wellbeing than secondary students do and that the gap has remained around the same level over the four-year period. While this result may be attributable to students facing increasing social, mental and physical health issues as they move into secondary school and through their teenage years, it warrants further examination.

The ATSS data is generally not supported by targets or benchmarks. Without these, it is difficult to gauge whether the results are in line with DEECD's expectations, or represent an acceptable outcome for its investment in student wellbeing. Moreover, without robust data on the effectiveness of programs and services, it is difficult to attribute results to DEECD's activities, other external influences, or just general population trends.

DEECD is doing extensive work to implement its new Outcomes and Evaluation Framework and other performance measurement initiatives. When completed, these activities should help measure the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services. Given that extensive resources have been allocated to improving student wellbeing over a number of years, DEECD needs to complete implementation of its performance measurement initiatives, actively monitor their operation and drive continuous improvement.

Recommendations

DEECD should:

2. Apply its Outcomes and Evaluation Framework to monitor, evaluate and review the effectiveness of its student wellbeing programs and services, and drive continuous improvement.
 3. Continue to actively monitor the differences in wellbeing levels across all primary and secondary schools and explore opportunities to redress the gaps between schools, including identifying and disseminating better practices adopted by schools.
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Appendix A.

Student Attitudes to School Survey results

Attitudes to School Survey results

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's (DEECD) Attitudes to School Survey (ATSS) is a voluntary student survey which schools administer covering five wellbeing-related measures:

- student morale
- student distress
- student safety
- perceptions of classroom behaviour
- connectedness to school.

Figures A1 to A10 show the ATSS results for the five student wellbeing measures between 2006–2009. Two figures are presented for each measure—one showing aggregated primary and secondary school scores and the other by year level. It is important to note that while the aggregated scores for Years 5 and 6 have been presented as a 'primary school' measure, they are in fact only a measure of the two upper years of primary school.

While the results presented are not direct representations of student wellbeing, it is likely that they reflect the general mental and physical wellbeing of the students completing the surveys. Rates of school participation and student responses were sufficiently high to place reliance on the results.

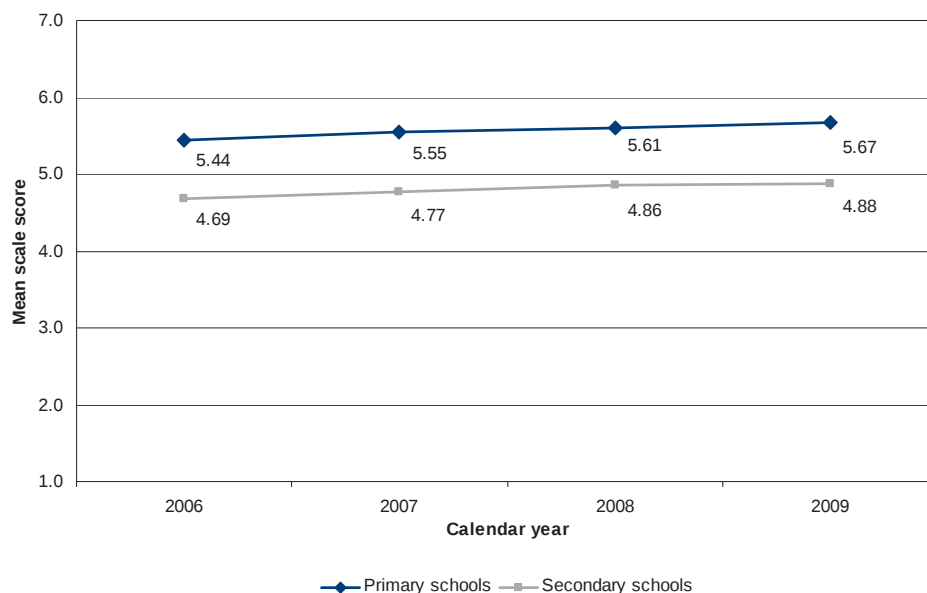
Student morale

To measure morale, students are asked to rate on a seven-point scale how far they agree with the following statements:

- I feel positive at school.
- I feel cheerful at school.
- I feel relaxed at school.
- I feel happy at school.
- I feel energised at school.

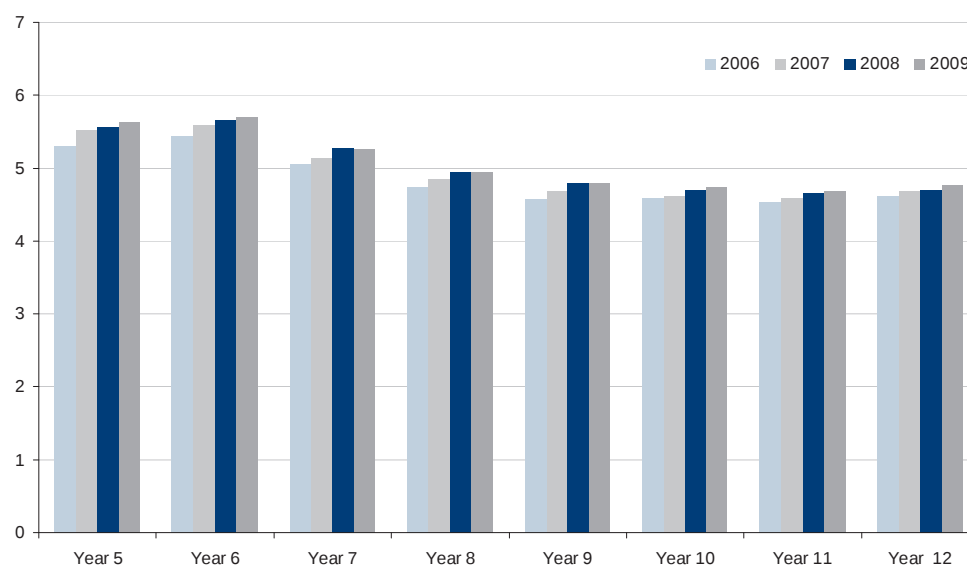
Student responses to these statements provide a good indication of the extent to which students feel positive at or about school. A high score reflects a highly positive state.

Figure A1
ATSS mean scores for student morale



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis of DEECD's ATSS data.

Figure A2
ATSS mean scores for student morale by year group



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis of DEECD's ATSS data.

In 2009, student morale among Years 5 and 6 students was substantially higher (mean score of 5.67) than among their counterparts in secondary school (mean score of 4.88).

Mean scores for morale drop consistently between Year 7 and Year 9, before slowing in Year 10 and eventually increasing again in Year 12. This effect may be associated with the most disaffected and unhappy students dropping out of the school system over time.

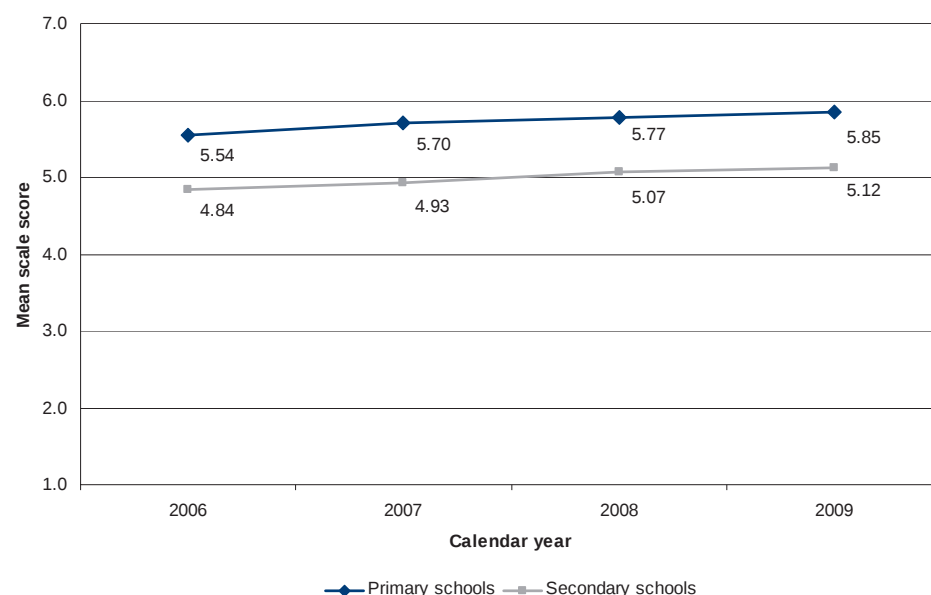
Student distress

To measure distress, students are asked to rate on a seven-point scale how strongly they agree with the following statements:

- I feel tense at school.
- I feel negative at school.
- I feel frustrated at school.
- I feel depressed at school.
- I feel uneasy at school.
- I feel stressed at school.

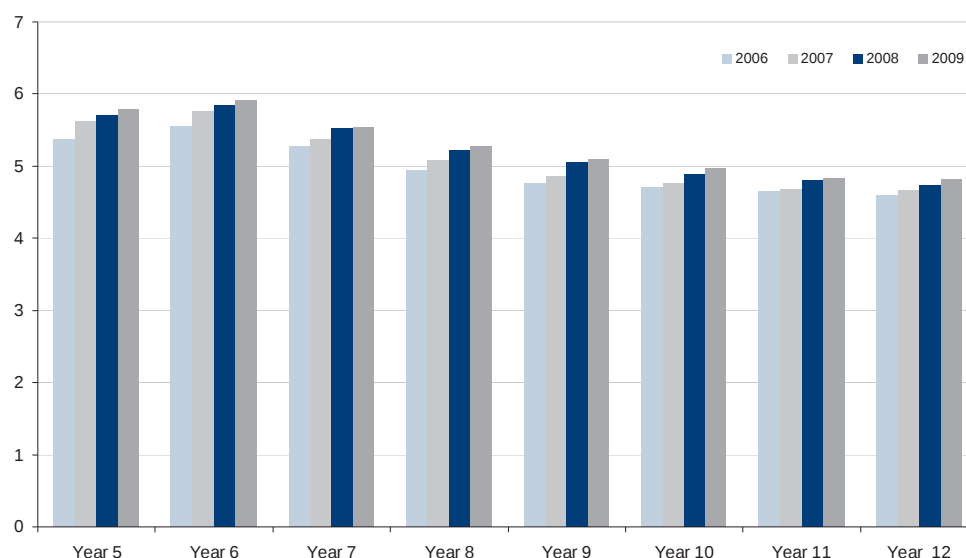
Student responses to these statements provide a good indication of whether students feel negative at or about school. The results for this measure are reversed to make it easier to compare other ATSS scores. This means that a high score reflects a low level of distress.

Figure A3
ATSS mean scores for student distress



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis of DEECD's ATSS data.

Figure A4
ATSS mean scores for student distress by year group



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis of DEECD's ATSS data.

Unlike student morale, which drops through Year 7 to Year 11, before picking up again in Year 12, levels of student distress increase consistently (shown as a decreasing score in Figures A3 and A4) as student pass through school. This difference may be a result of the fact that Year 11 and Year 12 students sitting formal examinations are subject to increased levels of distress.

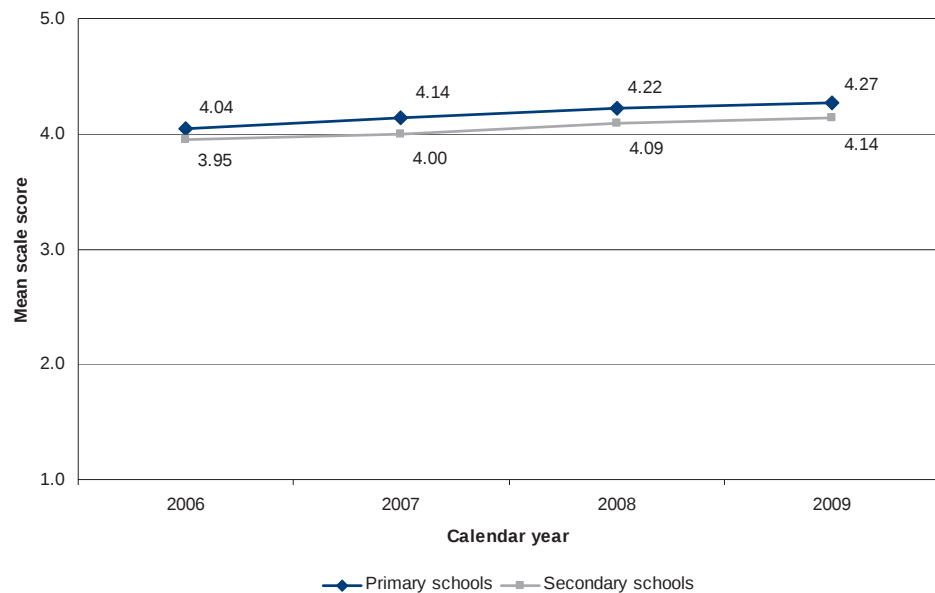
Student safety

To measure safety, students are asked to rate on a five-point scale how strongly they agree with the following statements:

- I have been bullied recently at school.
- I have been teased in an unpleasant way recently at my school.
- Students are mean to me at this school.
- I have been deliberately hit, kicked or threatened by another student recently.
- Other students often spread rumours about me at my school.

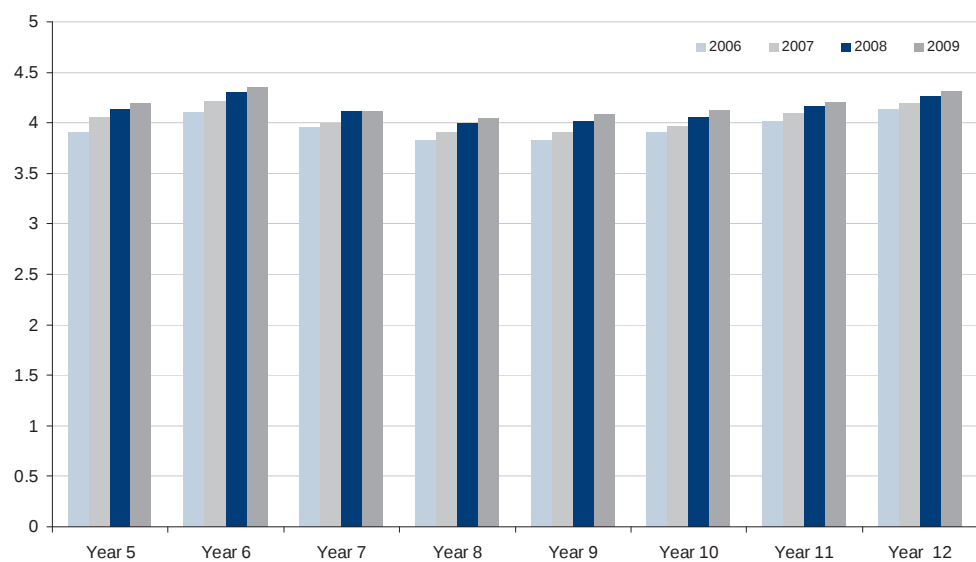
Student responses to these statements provide a good indication of the extent to which students feel they are safe from bullying and harassment. The results for this measure are reversed to make it easier to compare with other ATSS scores. This means that a high score represents a feeling of safety and security.

Figure A5
ATSS mean scores for student safety



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis of DEECD's ATSS data.

Figure A6
ATSS mean scores for student safety by year group



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis of DEECD's ATSS data.

Student perceptions of safety showed the smallest variation between year groups and this was the only measure of wellbeing where the results actually increased consistently from Year 7 to Year 12.

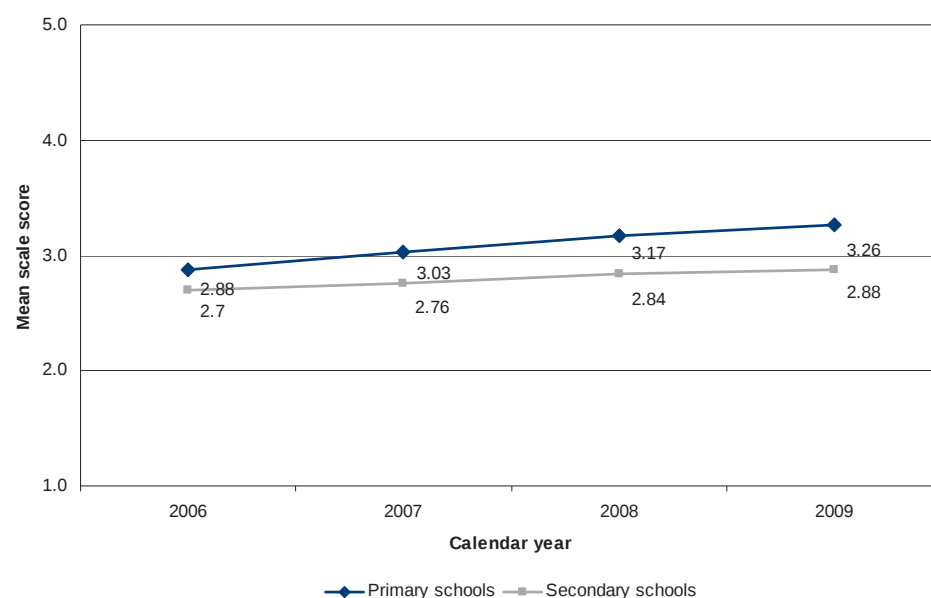
Perceptions of classroom behaviour

To measure classroom behaviour, students are asked to rate on a five-point scale how strongly they agree with the following statements:

- It's often hard to learn in class because some students are really disruptive.
- It's often hard to listen to the teacher in class, because other students are misbehaving.
- The behaviour of some students in class makes it hard for me to do my work.

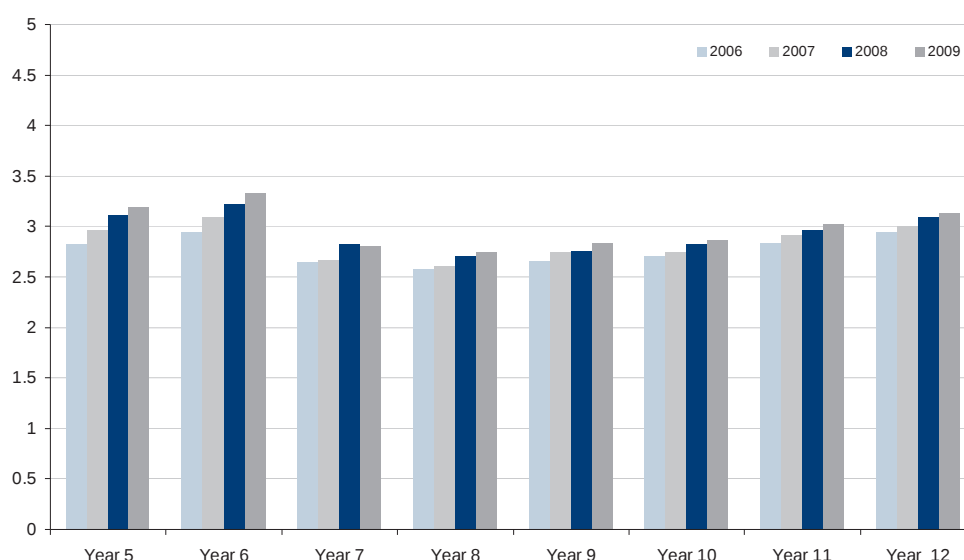
Student responses to these statements provide a good indication of whether other students are disruptive in class. The results for this measure are reversed to make it easier to compare with other ATSS scores. This means that a high score represents a well-behaved classroom.

Figure A7
ATSS mean scores for student perceptions of classroom behaviour by year group



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis of DEECD's ATSS data.

Figure A8
ATSS mean scores for student perceptions of
classroom behaviour by year group



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis of DEECD's ATSS data.

Student perceptions of classroom behaviour have improved more rapidly overall among Year 5 and Year 6 students than among their secondary school counterparts. The scores for classroom behaviour are also the lowest of all of the ATSS measures of wellbeing. This suggests that there is not a strong correlation between student perceptions of classroom behaviour and perceptions of safety.

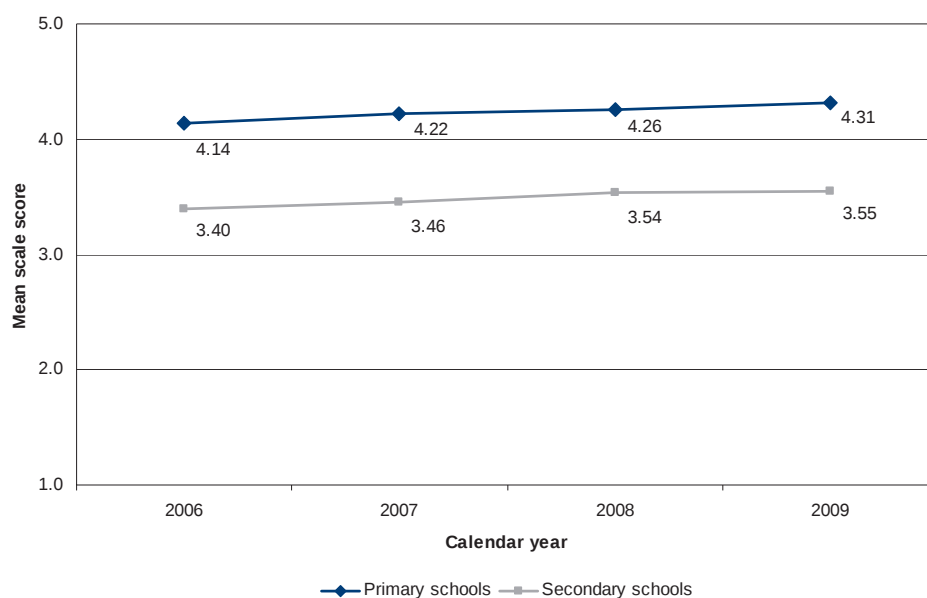
Connectedness to school

To measure connectedness to school, students are asked to rate on a five-point scale how far they agree with the following statements:

- I feel good about being a student at this school.
- I like school this year.
- I am happy to be at this school.
- I feel I belong at this school.
- I look forward to going to school.

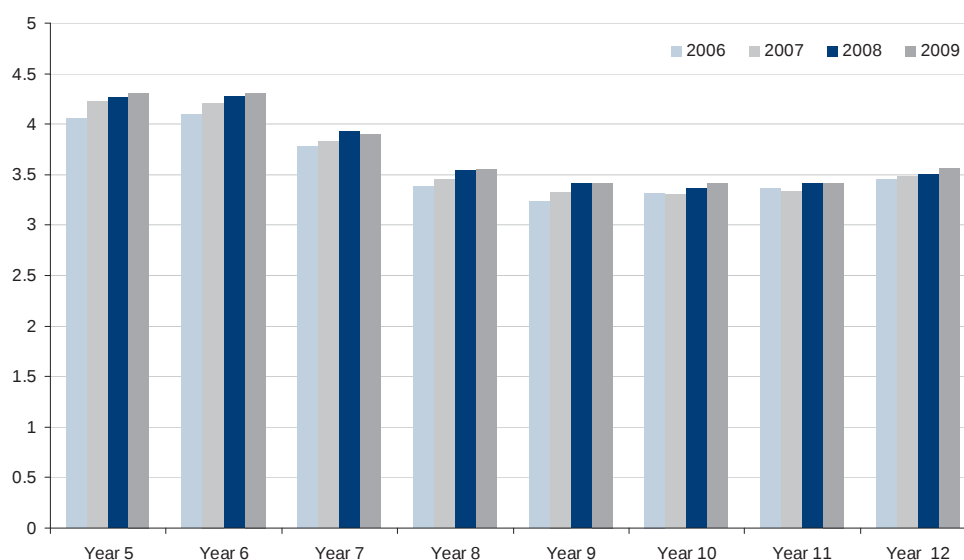
Student responses to these statements provide a good indication of whether students feel they belong and enjoy attending school. A high score reflects a high level of connectedness to school.

Figure A9
ATSS mean scores for student connectedness to school



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis of DEECD's ATSS data.

Figure A10
ATSS mean scores for student connectedness to school by year group



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis of DEECD's ATSS data.

Student connectedness to school scores show the biggest gap between the mean scores for Year 5 and Year 6 students and the collective mean score for secondary students. This may be a reflection of the fact that primary school students have a close association with one main class teacher, whereas secondary school students are taught by multiple teachers in a variety of subjects.

Appendix B.

Audit Act 1994 section 16— submissions and comments

Introduction

In accordance with section 16(3) of the *Audit Act 1994* a copy of this report, or relevant extracts from the report, was provided to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development with a request for comments or submissions.

The comments and submissions provided are not subject to audit nor the evidentiary standards required to reach an audit conclusion. Responsibility for the accuracy, fairness and balance of those comments rests solely with the agency head.

Submissions and comments received

RESPONSE provided by the Acting Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development



Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Office of the Secretary

2 Treasury Place
East Melbourne, Victoria 3002
Telephone: +61 3 9637 2000
DX 210083
GPO Box 4367
Melbourne, Victoria 3001

SEC020218

Mr D.D.R. Pearson
Auditor-General
Victorian Auditor-General's Office
Level 24, 35 Collins Street
MELBOURNE 3000

Dear Mr Pearson

Thank you for your letter of 18 December 2009 inviting management comments on the proposed report: *The Effectiveness of Student Wellbeing Programs and Services*.

The Department conveyed further comment on the Proposed Draft Report to VAGO officers by way of email on 06 January 2010.

We understand amendments to the final report have been endorsed at Assistant Auditor General level but require your final approval. These are considered positive and have been required from DEECD's perspective to ensure consistency and clarity regarding its existing policy framework and commitment to update its health and wellbeing service framework on which work has commenced.

The Department requests the attached management response be included in the report for tabling.

The Department's contact is Mr James Kelly, General Manager, Portfolio Governance and Improvement Division, telephone [redacted], should you wish to discuss the response and any matters further.

Yours sincerely

Darrell Fraser
Acting Secretary



RESPONSE provided by the Acting Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development – continued

The Department accepts the performance report on The Effectiveness of Student Wellbeing Programs and Services and welcomes its recognition that all of the programs and services examined have clearly defined objectives, a strong evidence base and clear need, and have had extensive community involvement in their development.

As articulated in its Corporate Plan and policy/planning documentation, the learning, development, health and wellbeing of all young Victorians, from birth to adulthood, are central to DEECD's operations. The Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development released in 2008 commits the Department to develop a health and wellbeing service framework for children and young people from 0–18 years. This Health and Wellbeing Service Framework (HWSF) will provide an integrated approach to optimise children and young people's health, wellbeing, learning and development outcomes by bringing together the Department's health and wellbeing services under a shared vision and set of principles. The HWSF will complement and inform the Framework for Student Support Services which has operated as the Department's overarching policy framework for its previous student wellbeing services (excluding school nursing).

The Department acknowledges the report's recognition of the variety of factors that may influence students' wellbeing, many of which will be outside the school setting.

In this context, DEECD has a rich source of data about the characteristics of schools in terms of student outcomes (student learning, engagement and wellbeing, pathways and transitions), teacher judgement data, student attitudes to school, staff opinion and parent opinion and a range of demographic measures.

It is important to note that student wellbeing outcomes should be thought of both at the school population level as well as at the individual level. For example, student services such as support officers and school nurses focus much of their time and effort on student wellbeing by addressing children's specific health and developmental needs. This important role, which may contribute to the overall wellbeing of the school population, is designed to ensure that children receive the additional help and clinical assistance they require to both make the most of the learning environment and to improve their life outcomes and overall wellbeing.

Conversely, based on analysis conducted by Insight SRC, in partnership with DEECD, from aggregated data from all primary and secondary Victorian government schools, student wellbeing is an important outcome of schooling, highly influenced by a school's overall climate and a critical outcome in relation to children and young people's health.

RESPONSE provided by the Acting Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development – continued

The School Performance Linkages Map resulting from this work and referred to briefly in the Auditor General's report, also shows that at the school level, student wellbeing and learning outcomes are **separate** and **distinct** and equally important outcomes. School improvement initiatives to enhance wellbeing will not necessarily result in improved learning, and initiatives to improve student learning will not necessarily result in improved student wellbeing. There are different drivers for these different outcomes.

The School Performance Linkages Map shows that the relationships between measures of school performance are complex and interconnected, and students' wellbeing is strongly influenced by their learning experiences in the classroom – ie their experiences of teaching and learning (Teacher Effectiveness, Teacher Empathy and Stimulating Learning).

Evidence suggests that a focus on student support and wellbeing programs that are disconnected from teaching and learning are unlikely to yield gains in student wellbeing. Programs aimed to enhance student wellbeing need to focus on improving teacher effectiveness and empathy, and creating a stimulating learning environment. This is not to say that some students do not need additional support, rather that at a program level, the importance of the learning environment cannot be neglected.

At the school level, the quality of teaching and learning practices (as reported by students) has a significant effect on increasing students' wellbeing – lifting their morale, reducing their distress and increasing their engagement and connectedness with school. Effective Schools are Engaging Schools – Student Engagement Policy Guidelines have been developed to support schools in promoting student engagement and attendance. The aim of the Guidelines is to ensure schools are happy, positive and safe environments where students learn, thrive and succeed.

As a system, DEECD also uses a suite of performance measures to make judgements about the quality and effectiveness of improvement at both a school and system level. However, we support audit's observation of the need to increase our shared understanding about student wellbeing and improve the useability of empirical measures of student wellbeing to inform the school and system environments.

Within this context, DEECD is pleased to note audit's finding that DEECD's performance data indicates that student wellbeing is improving overall. The Department in turn is confident that actions recently commenced will help to determine the impact of its programs and services on student wellbeing. In particular:

- the machinery of government transfer of the Office for Children from the Department of Human Services to form DEECD in 2007 has provided opportunities to enhance the health and wellbeing service systems for children and young people. The development of the Health and Wellbeing Service Framework (outlined in the *Blueprint for Education and Early*

RESPONSE provided by the Acting Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development – continued

Childhood Development in 2008) will set the direction for how these services can better support the health and wellbeing of children and young people from birth to 18 years; and

- *the Outcomes and Evaluation Framework will improve measurement of the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services and the sharing of research and best practice with regions and other stakeholders. DEECD shares audit's view that robust data is required to determine program and service effectiveness and underpin resource allocation decisions.*

In relation to the specific recommendations of the report, DEECD is confident work on each of them is already underway or can be readily implemented:

Recommendation 1 – Include in its Health and Wellbeing Service Framework:

- clearly defined overall student health and wellbeing outcomes
- descriptions of how programs and services relate to and affect each other, and how their delivery across relevant agencies will be coordinated.

This recommendation is accepted. As the report indicates, DEECD is developing this framework that will include a set of agreed measurable outcomes that will be drawn from the outcomes and indicators already set out in the Victorian Child and Adolescent Outcomes Framework. This will enable each program and service to account for their performance and will support an integrated approach to service delivery. The Framework, which will include student health and wellbeing outcomes, is due for completion in 2010.

Recommendation 2 – Apply its Outcomes and Evaluation Framework to monitor, evaluate and review the effectiveness of its student wellbeing programs and services, and drive continuous improvement.

This recommendation is accepted. As the report indicates, DEECD has recently developed an outcomes and evaluation framework to better measure its progress towards achieving its outcomes and goals. This framework has been subject to audit by the Auditor General's office in the performance audit examining Performance Reporting Across Government which is forthcoming. DEECD's progressive implementation of this framework will include application to student wellbeing programs and services.

RESPONSE provided by the Acting Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development – continued

Recommendation 3 – Continue to actively monitor the difference in wellbeing levels across all primary and secondary schools and explore opportunities to redress the gaps between schools, including identifying and disseminating better practices adopted by schools.

The recommendation is accepted. Differences in wellbeing levels identified by the audit report are, however, considered by DEECD to be expected across student year levels and reflect normal pathways for adolescent development. The Department's Attitudes to School Survey (ATSS) will however continue to be used to monitor wellbeing levels over time. DEECD will continue to explore opportunities for service system coordination and improvements that will make better use of the existing resources and redress gaps between schools, while providing a basis for identifying and disseminating better practices to be adopted by schools.

The findings and recommendations of the audit report can be expected to provide a basis for DEECD to drive improvement in student health and wellbeing services and programs. However DEECD makes the following comments on the specific finding that

'Service delivery demands (on the student support services program) may prevent some regions from delivering the planned service revisions and or within the required timeframes' (Section 2.4.2 of the VAGO Report).

DEECD believes this finding is at odds with feedback received through the regional forums and the data collection process established for the Program.

DEECD acknowledges that there are high service demands for student support services across the state. However, the Department's Student Wellbeing Division, together with Regional Student Support Services Coordinators, have established an effective mechanism for planning, monitoring and reviewing implementation of the new service delivery model through the monthly Statewide Student Support Services Coordination forum where regions routinely report progress in implementing the reforms and any issues or potential barriers are raised and addressed. Feedback from this forum indicates the Program is on track in meeting all its key project milestones. In addition, data from the student support services interim reporting process provides direct evidence that the service delivery model including school referral to the service and multidisciplinary service delivery is in place at the school level.

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