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INQUIRY INTO VICTORIA'S  
STATE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ORYGEN SUBMISSION

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### ORYGEN SUBMISSION

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Orygen welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Victoria's State Education System. Orygen's submission will address how the education system can better support student mental health and wellbeing, and how targeted and evidence-based support programs and services to improve student engagement and wellbeing.

### ABOUT ORYGEN

Orygen is the world's leading research and knowledge translation organisation focusing on mental ill-health in young people. At Orygen, our leadership and staff work to deliver cutting-edge research, policy development, innovative clinical services, and evidence-based training and education to ensure that there is continuous improvement in the treatments and care provided to young people experiencing mental ill-health.

Orygen conducts clinical research, runs clinical services (including five headspace centres), supports the professional development of the youth mental health workforce, and provides policy advice relating to young people's mental health. Our current research strengths include: early psychosis, mood disorders, personality disorders, functional recovery, suicide prevention, online interventions, neurobiology and health economics.

### CONTACT DETAILS

For further information, please contact:

David Baker  
Manager, Policy  
[david.baker@orygen.org.au](mailto:david.baker@orygen.org.au)

### THE CURRENT STATE OF STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN VICTORIA

The latest release of National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing data shows two-fifths of people aged 16–24 years had experienced a mental health disorder in the past 12 months.(1) One-third of lifetime mental health challenges begin before the age of 14 (half before the age of 18) and evidence suggests many people who experience mental ill-health during childhood continue to face difficulties into adulthood.(2, 3) Young people's mental health and wellbeing has been in decline for more than ten years. HILDA Survey data shows that while levels for 15–24 year olds were relatively stable from 2001–2010, they have been deteriorating since 2011 – particularly among women and girls. Likewise, data collected through Mission Australia's Youth Surveys show the prevalence of high psychological distress in young people (15–19 years) increased from 18.6 per cent in 2012 to 26.6 per cent in 2020.(4) By 2022 – two years into the COVID-19 pandemic – high psychological distress prevalence in young Victorians had risen to 29.1 per cent, effecting nearly one in three young people.(5) The number of young people presenting to emergency departments for treatment of intentional self-harm or suicide ideation has also increased significantly in recent years.(6-8) Nearly one-in-five (19.5%) of Australians aged 16–34 years have experienced suicidal thoughts or behaviours in their lifetime.(1)

## SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Orygen commends the whole-of-government commitment to the implementation of the recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, including the development of the Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu. Schools are ideally placed to coordinate an array of supports designed to fulfill a wider social obligation to protect and support children and young people.

Where a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively, the development social and emotional skills and resilience is an essential element of student education and preparation for adulthood. In this environment:

- students feel confident they can seek support from school staff;
- educators are equipped to reach out to and guide students they are concerned about; and
- school staff can confidently refer students to professional support services and psychological care might even be available on-site.

Education and employment are significant protective factors for a wide range of health and wellbeing outcomes, including income and life satisfaction. Conversely, disengagement from these activities has a negative impact on these outcomes. It is crucial that the Victorian education system continues to deliver evidence-based mental health and wellbeing programs and services in schools to ensure young people are supported to achieve their full economic participation and social potential.(9)

## IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Victoria's COVID-19 pandemic declaration concluded in October 2022 but the mental health consequences for young people are ongoing. For some young people the pandemic and its associated public health responses have exacerbated pre-existing youth mental health challenges. For others, it has been a contributing factor in the onset of mental ill-health.

Initially, young people's mental health outcomes were strongly influenced by emotional stressors such as anxiety about the virus itself, isolation, remote schooling, and family financial stress.(10-12) The 2022 Royal Children's Hospital Child Health Poll Victoria, found 42 per cent of Victorian children continued to experience mental health challenges that their parents attributed to remote schooling. Significant numbers of children were having difficulty with learning (35%); emotional, behavioural and social wellbeing (44%); social skills (38%); and friendships and connectedness (39%).(13)

Students experienced further challenges upon returning to in-person learning. As part of a COVID policy project, young people from Victoria told us the lack of daily routine and lowered performance expectations during the pandemic left them feeling disengaged from their lessons. This added to the "shock" of returning to the controlled school environment.

The pandemic has been most detrimental for young people already experiencing inequity and marginalisation, including: First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse, living with disability, LGBTQIA+, living in low socioeconomic conditions, or living in out of home care.(2, 3, 6-8, 11) For these groups, the pandemic has exacerbated the additional socioeconomic stressors they were already more likely to experience compared to the general population.(11, 14-18) It has also exacerbated the inequities in access to mental health support.(19)

### Recommendation

#### Evaluate the Victorian Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu

Evaluation should include (1) site access and navigation, school leaders, educators and staff uptake and feedback on resources, and (2) the evidence-base for mental health and wellbeing resources, and suitability for the diverse needs of student experiences and demographics.

## EXAMPLES OF PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Orygen has produced a number of evidence-based resources to assist people working to support young people's mental health and wellbeing in schools. These resources may be useful additional reading for Committee members and for those involved in the development and implementation of subsequent policies, programs, and initiatives.

The resources include:

- [A review of secondary school-based mental health prevention programs.](#)(20)
- [Implementing school-based mental health prevention programs toolkit.](#)(21)
- [Including student voice in school-based mental health programs toolkit.](#)(22)

### SUICIDE PREVENTION PROGRAMS IN SCHOOL

Evidence-based programs such as safeTALK has been safely delivered with young people aged 15 and over and increased participant's knowledge about suicide, confidence in discussing suicide related issues, and willingness to seek help for suicidal thoughts.(23) While stand-alone programs can have utility, multi-level interventions could provide better outcomes.(24) Orygen has incorporated safeTALK into a Multimodal Approach to Preventing Suicide in Schools (MAPSS) project responds to these rising rates of suicide.(25) The MAPSS project aims to reduce suicide risk and increase help-seeking among young people through three suicide prevention approaches:

- safeTALK educational workshops, delivered by Lifeline Australia facilitators,
- screening to identify students at risk of suicide, and
- online cognitive behavioural therapy.(26)

MAPSS is currently undergoing evaluation and researchers hypothesise the program will 'reduce suicide risk, improve risk recognition, increase health service use' among students taking part in the project.(25) Should this hypothesis be proven, MAPSS may be suitable for implementation by other schools and communities across Australia.

### DIGITAL RESOURCES FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

Although young people often seek professional healthcare support (for example, from GPs and psychologists) for their mental health, they also frequently turn to non-professional support networks, such as friends, family, schools, and online connections. A recent study found young people also spend an average of 3.5 hours supporting friends each week.(27)

Today's students exist in both online and offline environments. They seek mental health and wellbeing support for themselves online, and they also turn to digital resources to learn more about the issues their friends or peers are experiencing. Although the value of online resources and platforms for improving mental health and wellbeing is often polarising even among young people, it is important we acknowledge that many do find them helpful.(27)

Orygen's #chatsafe platform is an online suicide prevention tool and includes a set of evidence-informed guidelines to assist young people to communicate safely online about suicide.(26) Designed by young people, suicide prevention experts, and media and communications professionals, #chatspace provides users with information, tips and advice for talking about and responding to suicide and suicide ideation online.(28) The #chatsafe for educators resource has also been designed to help educators better equip the young people they have contact with to talk safely on social media about suicide. Promoting the #chatsafe platform through schools (where age appropriate) may also assist in raising young people's awareness of how to communicate safely within their online and offline peer networks and encourage help-seeking behaviours.

## Recommendation

### Trail and evaluate an integrated school-based suicide prevention program

Coordinate the trail and evaluation of an integrated, multi-modal school-based suicide prevention program. Evaluate the trial with a view to developing and implementing a statewide program.

## THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH TRAILBLAZER PROGRAM (UK)

The Trailblazer program from the UK provides a further option for supporting students' mental health. Launched in 2018, the Children and Young People's Mental Health Trailblazer program involved the development of an education mental health practitioner workforce and the embedding of mental health support teams in schools. Early evaluation of the program has found school staff felt more confident in supporting student mental health.(29)

## SCHOOL REFUSAL AND BROADER DISENGAGEMENT WITH EDUCATION

School closures during periods of lockdown have fundamentally changed how some young people engage with school. New research has shown a decrease in the proportion of students who believe it is important to attend school every day.(30) There has also been a substantial increase in the number of young people experiencing serious school detachment or attendance challenges ("school refusal") since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.(31) Furthermore, the number of Victorian students registered for home education doubled between 2019 and 2022.(32)

Solutions to school disengagement challenges will not be found without first understanding *why* some Victorian students do not feel a sense of belonging and security, motivation, or purpose at school. The views of those young people will be integral to understanding the reasons they do not feel attached to Victorian education environments.

Issues relating to school attendance and engagement with education must be addressed with a whole-of-government response. Multiple factors – including poor mental health and wellbeing – contribute to school disengagement and detachment. The ongoing individual and social mental health costs are also considerable.(33) Given the significant positive effect of education on later wellbeing outcomes – and, conversely, the negative impact of premature school disengagement – it is crucial that existing programs and support services (e.g., the Navigator program) are designed to manage fluctuating needs. The Victorian Auditor General's Office has evaluated the Navigator program and the Victorian Government has accepted its recommendations.(34)

## RECONCEIVING EDUCATION PRIORITIES TO FOSTER LIFE-LONG ENJOYMENT OF LEARNING AND IMPROVE WELLBEING OUTCOMES

There are clear gender trends in the extent to which school or study problems impacts young people. While nearly half of all female and gender diverse students are extremely or very concerned about school or study problems, only a quarter of male students report this level of concern.(5) The gendered nature of the relationship between school-related pressure and school satisfaction is by no means limited to Australian students. A statistical analysis of the World Health Organisation's Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study, which collected data from 32 European and North American nations between 2002 and 2018, found boys' satisfaction with school increased during this time, while girls reported increasing levels of school pressure. Notwithstanding the generally positive trend among boys, most students were not highly satisfied with their schooling. This is likely to impact internal motivation for both learning and school engagement.(35)

The most recent Youth Survey found two in five Victorian students nominated school challenges, particularly "pressure to achieve good grades" and "struggling to balance school and non-school commitments" – as their biggest personal challenge. The figure was higher again (three in five) for those Victorian students who were also experiencing psychological distress.(5)

During discussions with young people in May 2023, relating to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on attitudes towards education, young people told us they felt pressure to perform competitively across all areas of their lives: at school, home, in social contexts (including online), and when participating in extra-curricular activities. They described a lack of opportunity for exploring subjects of interest or trying new skills free from social expectations of success.

There is an opportunity to reconceive education priorities to foster life-long enjoyment of learning. These opportunities can be informed by existing guidelines and surveys, with the addition of student input and participation. When young people are empowered to meaningfully participate in all aspects of their school life and their educational experiences, they feel valued by and connected to their schools.(36, 37) The Victorian Department of Education and Training’s *Amplify* practice guide is available to assist school leaders and educators to establish conditions that recognise the important role of young people’s perspectives and empower them to play an equal role in the design of educational models that improve their learning experience and wider wellbeing outcomes.(38) Existing data collected through the annual *Attitudes to School* survey offer individual school leaders’ an opportunity to better understand students’ views about various aspects of their school lives, including mental health and wellbeing.(39)

**Recommendation**

**Develop a student engagement model and implementation resources**

Develop resources for schools to co-produce extra-curricular activities with students to foster learning for interest and social engagement. Tailor resources by incorporating data from the *Attitudes to School* survey, the *Amplify* practice guide and resources to facilitate student engagement.



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**Orygen acknowledges** the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

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ORYGEN.ORG.AU  
+61 3 9966 9100  
35 POPLAR ROAD  
PARKVILLE VIC 3052  
AUSTRALIA

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DAVID BAKER  
POLICY MANAGER  
DAVID.BAKER  
@ORYGEN.ORG.AU

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