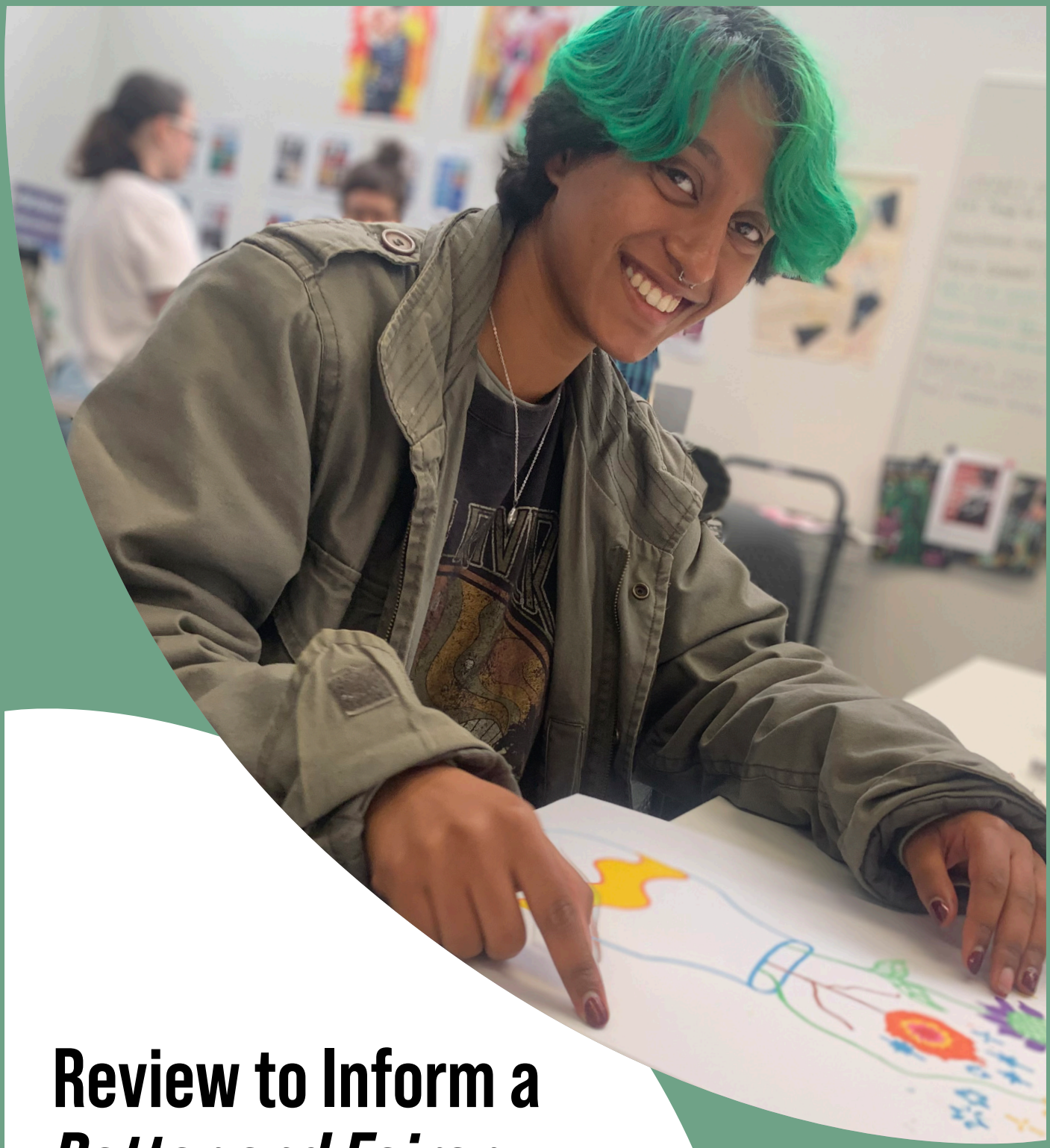

Review to Inform a *Better and Fairer Education System*

Submission to the Department of Education

HESTER HORNBROOK ACADEMY | mcm.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Hester Hornbrook Academy acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work and note that this document was developed on the lands of the Bunurong, Wurundjeri and Woi Wurrung peoples of the Eastern Kulin Nation.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge the ongoing leadership role of the Aboriginal community in creating services and support to ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are raised in safe, healthy and culturally rich families and communities and have every opportunity for a bright future.

Hester Hornbrook Academy recognises the right to self-determination and provides endorsement of submissions made by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This submission would not have been possible without the generosity and support of several individuals. Most importantly, we would like to acknowledge and thank Kaylee Booth Scullin, Sam Gavin, Bella Gokkaya, Eliud Alemayo Temesghen and Zara Watson, students and graduates of Hester Hornbrook Academy, whose insights have been integral to shaping and guiding this submission.

The submission also draws on the expertise of Hester Hornbrook Academy and Melbourne City Mission staff. Particular thanks to: Sally Lasslett, Shorna Moore, Emma Bruce, Sandhya Jadunundun, Joel Doutch, Ben Reed, Sam Barrett, Cameron Rowe, Amanda Amato, Adriana Bonifacio, Michael Freedman, Felicity Gibbons, Kate Dennis, Elise Leadbetter and Karleigh Whyte.

ABOUT HESTER HORNBROOK ACADEMY

The vision at Hester Hornbrook Academy (**Hester Hornbrook**) is for an inclusive and just community where all young people have equal access to education and the opportunity to create their own future.

For Hester Hornbrook students, the sheer thought of entering an educational facility creates anxiety. This is often due to past experiences of childhood trauma, which can include family violence, bullying, learning difficulties and mental health-related issues.

Hester Hornbrook, founded by Melbourne City Mission and registered as an independent Special Assistance School in 2017, offers fee-free Senior Secondary School education for students who are 15 to 25 years of age. Hester Hornbrook engages students' hearts and minds to learn, build confidence, and improve well-being and educational outcomes resulting in pursuing positive pathways in the future. The school is focused on supporting young people who have experienced education and/or social challenges, have disengaged from school and from some of the most disadvantaged areas of Victoria.

Hester Hornbrook is at the cutting edge of providing students with flexible applied learning options, extensive literacy and numeracy tier-three interventions and assertive outreach, alongside a strong allied health and auxiliary team, including mental health supports, school lawyers, nurses and doctors. Occupational and Speech Therapists develop students' individual strengths and build their social and emotional competencies. The school combines education and wellbeing support with a teacher, educational intervention specialist and youth worker in every classroom.

Hester Hornbrook has campuses in Melbourne, Prahran, Sunshine and South Melbourne, educating more than 450 students and developments underway for two new campuses in Werribee and Donnybrook, with additional locations being sourced in the South East and outer metropolitan areas.

INTRODUCTION

Education is not a privilege. It is a fundamental human right and is the key to unlocking the ability of individuals to reach their full potential. Inclusive education is ensuring that every student has access to quality schooling – regardless of their home situation, financial standing, mental health, academic ability or previous experiences of educational success. Inclusive education ensures a future that offers equal opportunities to all young people.

Hester Hornbrook welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Education's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System. This submission focuses on several key themes addressed in the Consultation Paper from the perspective of an independent Special Assistance School, and in particular, draws attention to improving student outcomes and mental health and wellbeing.

The current mainstream education system is not suited to all students, many young people face multiple barriers to school attendance. Current policies provide funding to schools based on student attendance which neglects students who are better suited to alternative learning arrangements or who are not engaged in their current learning environment. Independently registered Special Assistance Schools provide an alternative educational environment for the most vulnerable and marginalised students. To guarantee a better and fairer education system, there is a need to review the next National School Reform Agreement to ensure these schools are included as a key part of the education system.

We all know that when we address the barriers to accessing education within a flexible, supportive, therapeutic educational environment, student outcomes across all domains are positively impacted. This in turn can change the lives of the young people engaged, their families and the broader community.

This review provides an exciting opportunity to improve and progress our Australian education system including a focus on how we move to a culture of wellbeing; how flexible and remote teaching and learning might play a bigger role in education and how we can move the measurement of student outcomes beyond academic performance to include engagement, wellbeing and positive pathways to fully realise the potential of all students.

Hester Hornbrook also provides endorsement of the Victorian Council of Social Service's submission in response to the Consultation.

IMPROVING STUDENT OUTCOMES – INCLUDING FOR STUDENTS MOST AT RISK OF FALLING BEHIND

STUDENT OUTCOMES

Participation and attainment in education disrupts disadvantage and provides a passport to a positive future.

Hester Hornbrook strongly supports the Productivity Commission's description of equity in education that ensures schooling equips each student with the basic skills required for success in life and to reduce or eliminate differences in outcomes across students with different backgrounds, experiences and needs. Barriers that prevent children and young people from accessing, participating, and completing education must be dismantled.

A single focus on academic results causes high levels of anxiety for some students and has driven detrimental competition and discrimination within schools and the wider community, causing some students to be excluded from the education system. Furthermore, standardised marking and testing and looking at averages, has introduced further barriers to guaranteeing an accessible and inclusive education system.

A key measure of academic performance is standardised numeracy and literacy testing through the

NAPLAN and the General Achievement Test (GAT)[1] in Victoria. However, for many students who have high levels of social and emotional disabilities, their rates of participation are low. The way standardised tests are typically administered (including the special consideration adaptations offered) does not work for this cohort and often exacerbates pre-existing mental health conditions, that can lead to a student having to attend an emergency department. There are alternative fit-for-purpose testing tools available, which need to be factored into the design of measuring numeracy and literacy. For example, the Basic Knowledge Skill Builder, a program with self-paced testing used extensively in the TAFE sector to assess literacy and numeracy.

The measurement of student outcomes needs to go beyond achieving highest levels of academic performance to fully realise the potential of all students. These outcomes include engagement, wellbeing and positive pathways, which are shaped and led by student voice and choice.

ATTENDANCE AND ENGAGEMENT

Student participation and engagement is critical for learning, however schools only measure physical attendance often referred to as 'student attendance'. This on-site attendance needed to meet the government's funding requirements is beyond some students despite their, and the schools', best efforts. For some students, their significant mental health and trauma experiences and/or their current state of crisis means that they are unable to present to campus. There are also students who have high levels of physical attendance but are not engaged in their learning

Case Study: Sam's Story

Sam had an almost perfect attendance rate at his previous school because he was concerned about getting detentions and punished, however he was not engaged and consequently fell behind. He experienced high levels of anxiety at school and found it difficult to participate in his education and develop social connections, and as a result he felt as though he didn't belong.

"There was just a lot of anxiety. There was just too much work, [and] personal problems add into it. I had to get up because I didn't want to get detention, didn't want to cop it from teachers, my friends and all that."

In addition to measuring physical attendance on campus, there is a need to measure engagement in campus life and school wellbeing supports, engagement via outreach and engagement in the teaching and learning in the classroom.

One facet of this includes refining our definition of attendance and participation in schooling. Specifically, we see a distinction between 'turning up', as in 'participation rates' or 'bums on seats' versus the 'deeper' meaning of engagement which also considers how teaching and learning away from the classroom might fit into the Australian education system going forward.

Schools have an obligation to support student learning regardless of students' personal circumstances or background and therefore schools need to have systems in place to address these additional needs including addressing barriers that prevent students from participating in their education.

RECOMMENDATION 1: To adequately measure student participation in school, the next National School Reform Agreement needs to measure engagement alongside attendance. This can include engagement in campus life and school wellbeing supports, engagement via outreach and engagement in the teaching and learning in the classroom. This needs to also consider how teaching and learning away from the classroom might fit into the Australian education system going forward.

1 The General Achievement Test (GAT) a pen-and-paper test of general knowledge and skills taken by students in the course of completing their senior secondary studies. The GAT plays an important role in the quality assurance of VCE assessments and also provides students with an opportunity to demonstrate they meet the Victorian Literacy and Numeracy Standards expected at a senior secondary level.

RECOMMENDATION 2: To fairly measure a student's academic performance, the next National School Reform Agreement needs to consider alternative fit-for-purpose testing tools, especially for students with high levels of social and emotional disabilities. For example, the Basic Knowledge Skill Builder, a program with self-paced testing used extensively in the TAFE sector to assess literacy and numeracy.

WELLBEING

Hester Hornbrook's program of education, HOPE – Healing Oriented Program of Education, prioritises equal access to quality education and wellbeing support for all young people, with a focus on ensuring each student is equipped with the basic social and emotional skills required for success in life. The program of education - HOPE, places equal value on both education and wellbeing, measuring student outcomes in the areas of communication, decision making, resilience, global citizenship, empathy and collaboration.

Measured health and wellbeing outcomes include (non-exhaustive):

- Students feel safe
- Students feel they belong to a community and have access to seamless network of support
- Students have the capacity to manage their own wellbeing
- Students are less dependent on support services
- Students are happy
- Cultural Competency
- Enhanced Self Advocacy
- Improved Health
- Enhanced Social Connection
- Students engage meaningfully with their communities.
- Students have a positive experience with school
- Students have the capability to manage important relationships
- Students have the life skills they need to live independently.

RECOMMENDATION 3: To ensure schools equip each student with the basic skills required for success in life, the next National School Reform Agreement needs to measure student wellbeing outcomes in the areas of communication, decision making, resilience, global citizenship, empathy and collaboration, alongside literacy and numeracy. The way in which we measure these outcomes needs to be considerate of each individual and not standardised.

POSITIVE PATHWAYS

The current measure of educational attainment, defined as completing year 12 or gaining a non-school qualification at Certificate III level or above, is narrowly defined and does not include other positive pathways, such as, to secure employment. It is important to measure these pathways along-side educational attainment, given some students, including students from lower socio-economic backgrounds or students with no parental or family support, may choose to pathway from school to employment to ensure financial stability – allowing them to pursue further study or training later.

At Hester Hornbrook, positive pathway outcomes measured include graduation, further education and or training, apprenticeships, secure and stable employment and well supported and managed mental health and wellbeing. The Alumni Program ensures that students receive ongoing support beyond their time at Hester Hornbrook, assisting young people in pursuing further education, employment, and personal growth, and is discussed in further detail below in the Submission.

It is also vital to recognise structural inequalities in areas such as social security and the low rate of Youth Allowance, that can impact the level of educational attainment for a student and their pathways. For some young people who are experiencing homelessness or living independently without any form of parental support, they may be forced to leave school early and gain full time employment, especially in the context of a housing and cost of living crisis.

As a matter of urgency, the Commonwealth Government must significantly increase the rate of Youth Allowance and related income support payments to at least $76 per day, so students can meet the basic costs of living and continue to participate in their education.

RECOMMENDATION 4: To ensure that young people are able to participate in community in a meaningful way through employment and participation in the workforce, as their chosen individualised pathway, the next National School Reform Agreement needs to measure positive pathway outcomes in addition to educational attainment.

RECOMMENDATION 5: To reduce poverty and inequality amongst young Australians and support their engagement with education, the Commonwealth Government needs to increase the Jobseeker and Youth Allowance rate to at least $76 per day.

FLEXIBLE AND INDIVIDUALISED LEARNING – EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

Case Study: Kaylee's Story

Kaylee was 16 when she enrolled at Hester Hornbrook. She left her previous local government school at the end of year nine.

Kaylee was struggling to attend her previous school with a 30 per cent attendance rate. She felt very lonely and struggled to focus in class due to her ADHD other physical health challenges. Kaylee required extra assistance and an adapted pace that a traditional school could not offer. What she needed was a different way of learning that was not reliant on processing verbal information from a teacher at the front of the classroom.

Kaylee is now 17 and completing her VCE Vocational Major. The difference at Hester Hornbrook for Kaylee is that she can access significant wellbeing supports, she feels safe and respected in the learning environment and is supported to develop her literacy skills with targeted tier three interventions. Kaylee has access to applied learning opportunities through hospitality and STEM. She can work on areas of learning that she needs with the support of an Individual Education Plan that has a significant focus on her neurodiversity.

The campus staff work in smaller student and staff hubs, allowing movement as required. Regular breaks and a tailored applied learning program, provide Kaylee with a learning environment that supports her educational needs and allows her to pursue an education that was not possible in the mainstream education system.

Education that engages all, needs to consider the individual learner and the situations that young people face in the moment and throughout their educational endeavours. Presenting issues in young people, such as experiences of trauma, mental health complexities, homelessness and family violence, create the need for alternative flexible education models.

Young people begin their learning and wellbeing journey at Hester Hornbrook up to six years behind their biological age and expected literacy and numeracy levels. These young people have fallen through the system gaps and are at significant disadvantage both educationally and with regard to potential employment opportunities. Research conducted by Hester Hornbrook suggests that there are in excess of 15,000 young people aged between the ages of 15 to 21 who are NEET – Not in Employment Education and Training, in Victoria alone.

Case Study: James' Story

James is a 21-year-old young person who fell significantly behind at the age of 15. When he arrived at Hester Hornbrook as a 21-year-old young man, he was unable to write or verbally spell his name and could not write his home address. He had been exploited in employment since the age of 15. With extensive tier three educational interventions and a safe and respectful learning and wellbeing environment James' learning growth happened inside four months. He continues to complete his final senior school certificate and has already secured a work placement and employment at the end of this year.

Following the global pandemic, flexible and individualised learning has become more normalised as we are more readily accepting a blend of virtual and in-person classes. There are clear benefits to individualised, student-centred education – creating opportunities for innovation within practical applications.

The pandemic challenged the mental health of many students, and since the reopening of schools, the data has shown that many have been unable to return to the classroom and to onsite learning. National attendance rates show a steady decline in public, private, Catholic and independent schools and this growing cohort across Australia are at risk of disengaging from their education completely.

Hester Hornbrook is one of the growing list of independently registered Special Assistance Schools in Australia[2], representing almost 10 per cent of independent schools, according to Independent Schools Australia. These flexible and individualised schools work especially for and with students experiencing complex barriers to their education and who have disengaged from mainstream schooling.

Hester Hornbook Principal Sally Lasslett explains,

> *"Students who were formally fearful of returning to school are learning to code a game or develop their own podcast in our applied learning environments and graduating secondary school with similar levels of numeracy and literacy to those learning trigonometry and reading The Crucible in traditional school environments. They just needed a different way to learn."*

Hester Hornbrook South Melbourne student Bella Gokkaya, 15, was enrolled in three previous high schools and said she had trouble with the traditional school environment.

> *"Mainstream school is made for one type of person, and you are meant to fit into that type of bubble. Here, the bubble fits into you."*

Hester Hornbrook's education program enables students to pursue their learning journey and access a range of wellbeing supports, choices and opportunities. Learning options support students to gain applied, hands-on skills in creative arts, business, community services, music, IT and hospitality. Other examples of flexible learning options and environments offered at Hester Hornbrook include a Young Parents classroom where students can be pregnant and can bring their baby to class when they are ready to return to learning. The Engage Youth programs, provide students with outreach education and workshops to develop capacity to attend the educational environment.

In 2022, at least 76 per cent of Hester Hornbrook students who finished school, went on to further education, employment or apprenticeships.

2 See Independent Schools Australia available at https://isa.edu.au/our-sector/diversity/special-assistance-schools/

RECOMMENDATION 6:

The next National School Reform Agreement needs to increase flexible learning options and reduce stigma for students who want or need to pursue education in a non-traditional setting by:

a) Shifting the government's perspective and changing its narrative on flexible learning, by sharing compelling research and other evidence pieces (e.g., policy submissions, presentations to Education State forums) that demonstrate its impact to policy makers.

b) Dismantling funding incentives that drive some schools to delay referrals of disengaged learners to flexible learning environments – enrolments should optimally come early in the school year or at the completion of an academic year, as part of an early intervention strategy.

PRIORITY COHORTS

There are persistent challenges for particular cohorts of students who face historical and systemic barriers that hinder their ability to reach their full learning potential including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural and remote locations and students with disabilities.

Hester Hornbrook agrees with the Productivity Commission's identification of additional student groups who are likely to face significant barriers that impact their educational outcomes, especially students in out-of-home care, students from refugee background and students in the youth justice system.

In addition, Hester Hornbrook strongly recommends the inclusion of 'unaccompanied students in homelessness' and 'mature minors who live independently without any parental/carer support'. According to Melbourne City Mission **(MCM)**, the youth homelessness crisis is having a massive impact on education outcomes for children and young people in Victoria. Data released by MCM reveals that only 14 per cent of 15- to 19-year-olds who came to the state-wide youth homelessness access point alone in 2021-22, were enrolled in school, and just 13 per cent were enrolled in other training.

The next National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA) should broaden its definition of priority cohorts to include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students
- Students living in regional, rural and remote locations
- Students with Disabilities (including social and emotional disability and neurodiversity)
- Students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds
- Students in out-of-home-care
- Students from newly arrived and refugee backgrounds
- Students in the youth justice system
- Unaccompanied students experiencing homelessness
- Students who are mature minors and living independently

Identification of priority cohorts allows a focus and increases visibility, along with more accountability and the essential requirement for interdepartmental government collaboration. Students will fall across multiple priority cohorts, it is therefore crucial that an intersectional approach is adopted in responding to equity cohorts.

RECOMMENDATION 7: To ensure the education system performs well for all students, the next National School Reform Agreement should add additional priority equity cohorts who are likely to encounter systemic barriers within the education system. These are students in out-of-home care, unaccompanied students experiencing homelessness, students who are mature minors and living independently, students in the youth justice system and students from newly arrived and refugee backgrounds.

RECOMMENDATION 8: The next National School Reform Agreement needs to adopt a broad definition of students with disabilities to include social and emotional disability and neurodiversity.

IMPROVING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Case Study: Sarah's Story

Sarah presented with post-traumatic stress disorder and borderline personality disorder and had a history of low attendance and disengagement from prior schooling. Her mental health challenges and school attendance were exacerbated by housing instability and limited access to community resources, resulting in low self-care and poor nutritional status. Suicidal ideation further highlighted the urgency of providing comprehensive support.

When Sarah began her enrolment at Hester Hornbrook, she was assigned a key worker who played a central role in building a strong connection. The Living Learning Program at Hester Hornbrook offered specialised mental health supports and an encouraging environment tailored to Sarah's needs. After an initial needs assessment was conducted, Sarah was placed into the Engage Youth classroom, which allowed her to build her confidence and develop her literacy and numeracy learning before moving to a standard class. Additionally, she received support from the occupational therapist care team, which helped her apply for National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) funding for supported independent living.

With the combined efforts of staff across Hester Hornbrook, Sarah experienced transformative wellbeing and educational outcomes. The youth worker coordinated essential resources and supports, providing brokerage, personal training, and personal hygiene skills development. A significant milestone was achieved when the youth worker supported Sarah in having her first haircut, symbolising the growing trust between them.

Sarah thrived academically when provided with the appropriate environment and support, reflecting her high intelligence. By engaging in several supports and maintaining crisis accommodation, her wellbeing improved significantly.

By prioritizing both education and wellbeing, Hester Hornbrook provided wraparound support, leading to improved mental health, academic success, and an enhanced sense of self-worth for the student. The youth worker's dedication, along with the collaborative efforts of the school staff and the occupational therapist care team, facilitated Sarah's access to essential resources and supports. Sarah's story emphasises the importance of an integrated approach in supporting students to engage safely and supportively in education pathways, ultimately helping them reach their full potential.

A WELLBEING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT – THE HOPE MODEL

Recent and compelling research suggests that social emotional health is foundational to cognitive development[3]. Whole school approaches have been highlighted as central to improving the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people[4]. Additionally, compassionate and trauma responsive schools have been shown to have positive wellbeing outcomes when engaging disengaged young people.

The HOPE model at Hester Hornbrook is a holistic and systemic approach to enhancing the individual and educational needs of students that supports their own identified outcomes. HOPE takes an Individualised Wellbeing for Learning, Learning for Wellbeing, also known as 'Learning Choice' approach to student engagement, attendance and education, ensuring that healing occurs in a trauma informed environment. Rather than assuming that something about the young person needs to change, it suggests something

3 Compassionate Schools. Responding to Kids Impacted by Adversity, Trauma, and Toxic Stress ByRon Hertel, Susan O. Kincaid Book Optimizing Learning Outcomes Edition1st Edition First Published2017 Imprint Routledge Pages18 eBook ISBN9781315563565

4 The Compassionate Schools Framework: Exploring a Values-Driven, Hope-Filled, Relational Approach with School Leaders Quinn, Kirsty; Mollet, Nicola; Dawson, Fiona Educational & Child Psychology, v38 n1 p24-36 Mar 2021

about educational provision needs to change[5]. A key assumption with this approach is that all young people have the capacity to learn and gain school credentials as long as the educational environment is right[4].

Hester Hornbrook is on the growing list of independently registered Special Assistance Schools in Australia, offering a trauma-informed, healing-oriented learning environment. These flexible and individualised schools work especially for and with students experiencing complex barriers to their education and who continue to disengage from mainstream schooling. The approach prioritises student mental health and wellbeing.

A trauma informed, healing oriented approach recognises that many students may have experienced various forms of trauma, such as abuse, neglect, violence, loss, or other adverse experiences, which can significantly affect their emotional, psychological, and cognitive well-being. Exposure to different types of trauma have been associated with varying types and complexity of adverse outcomes, including adverse effects on cognitive functioning, attention, memory, academic performance, and school-related behaviours[6].

Based on MCM Healing Oriented Framework, Hester Hornbrook's Healing Oriented Program of Education or HOPE model, guides educational and wellbeing approaches and highlights the importance of connection and relationships. This holistic approach to education and wellbeing acknowledges the dependency wellbeing and educational outcomes have on each other. This approach is built upon a foundation of safety, trust, agency and supportive relationships and provides an opportunity to focus on the critical relationship between learning and wellbeing for young people.

What this looks like in practice is highlighted under 6 key principles:

Empowerment and Collaboration: The HOPE model brings together Multidisciplinary teams to work collaboratively to provide educational intervention, deliver personalised, applied curriculum, including the wellbeing supports (allied health, nurses, GPs, mental health support) that empower young people to take an active role in making positive change in their lives. Each classroom team includes a teacher to deliver curriculum content and assessments; a youth worker to understand wellbeing needs and supports required and to complete outreach; an educational intervention specialist to complete educational needs assessment and interventions; and an allied health and auxiliary team that work collaboratively with classroom teams to support the individual needs of young people. Additionally, the Hester Hornbrook team collaborates with experts, external services, and families to build a strong support network for students, enhancing their chances of success.

By using student voice and choice (via our Student Association and Leadership Program) the model encourages co-creation of the classroom environment and learning approach so that students experience ownership and belonging and build their experiences of personal agency. Hester Hornbrook gives students a voice through the Student Leadership team, providing avenues for all students to share their ideas, make changes and support the growing school community. By involving students in decision-making through the Student Association and Leadership program, the model gives them a voice and empowers them to shape their educational experiences positively.

Sensitivity and Adaptability: The HOPE model is human centred, highly inclusive and flexible to meet the needs of individual students. Flexible and individualised learning is an important component of the model as a blend of virtual and in-person classes is more readily accepted. The HOPE model provides flexible start times (acknowledging the natural sleep patterns and brain function of adolescents and that some young people who carry trauma have disrupted sleep) and a blend of virtual and in-person classes aimed at meeting the individual needs of each student.

Each morning when students arrive at school, they are invited to complete a Wellbeing Check-in using the Ripple website[7]. Students are asked to rate themselves from 1 to 9 on food, sleep, safety, friendships, confidence, happiness, calmness, concentration and health. Classroom teams use the information day-to-day to adjust activities and their approaches in the classroom and follow up with students if they show they are feeling low. The information is also used to inform the kinds of resources, activities and

5 Riele, K.t. Educational alternatives for marginalised youth. Aust. Educ. Res. 34, 53–68 (2007). https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03216865

6 Maynard BR, Farina A, Dell NA, Kelly MS. Effects of trauma-informed approaches in schools: A systematic review. Campbell Syst Rev. 2019 Jul 17;15(1-2):e1018. doi: 10.1002/cl2.1018. PMID: 37131480; PMCID: PMC8356508

7 https://ripple.com.au/schools/

approaches used to support students and provides real time feedback on the impacts the supports are having on students.

Relational: The HOPE model recognises that healing occurs in the context of safe relationships, whilst acknowledging that for some people relationships can feel threatening and have been the environment and source of traumatic experiences. Staff take responsibility to develop safe and supportive relationships; offering dignity and respect and an understanding that connection takes time. Staff work to create new experiences, attending to ruptures in relationships. This is enabled via a staff to student ratio of 1 to 7 in each classroom.

Safety and Trust: The HOPE model recognises the impact of trauma on people's sense of safety and trust in the world. School staff work to create a sense of safety, with a focus on being consistent, predictable and respectful. Staff check-in with students daily and pay attention to the physical, emotional and relational environment.

Staff take responsibility to develop trust; that is, they are predictable, transparent and consistent approaches to relationships and education. Staff share information and are clear about people's privacy and the right to choose and direct their own individual educational journey.

Inclusive: The HOPE model ensures that every student has access to quality education and schooling – regardless of their home situation, financial standing, mental health, academic ability or previous experiences of educational success. Inclusive education ensures a future that offers equal opportunities to all young people. The model acknowledges the diverse needs of students, including those from First Nations communities, and strives to create an inclusive and respectful environment.

Continued support: The HOPE model includes an Alumni Program that ensures students have access to a range of continuing Alumni supports once they finish their schooling. This includes career planning, assisting them in pursuing further education, employment assistance and job searching, support with post-secondary study (for example, weekly tutoring) and assessments and personal growth.

Demand for flexible learning environments with a focus on wellbeing is rapidly growing. Since 2018, the number of students enrolled across Hester Hornbrook campuses in South Melbourne, Melbourne, Sunshine, and Prahran each year has grown from 170 to 382 in 2022 – more than doubling in the last five years. 435 student enrolments are forecast across campuses in 2023. A further 140 students are on Hester Hornbrook's waitlist, which has more than doubled in the last 12 months, with expressions of interest coming from mainstream schools, parents, and services like the Victorian Navigator[8] program who are unable to reengage students in their previous school as the program is designed to do.

Hester Hornbook Principal Sally Lasslett explains,

> *"When mainstream schools are not able to provide the services, wellbeing support and individualised programs some young learners need, they look to us to assist. Flexible learning environments like ours complement the mainstream school system."*
>
> *"But right now, we can't grow fast enough to meet demand. We need more places for students and call on Federal, State and Territory education systems and schools to consider changes they can make to create more flexibility in the way education is delivered."*

Eritrean refugee Eliud Alemayo Temesghen, 18, is a student at the school's South Melbourne campus and says the environment is nurturing.

> *"All the stress I have in my old school – I can leave that all and come here and learn. They look inside me and try and understand me,"* he said.

8 https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/navigator-program/policy

IN FOCUS: Living Learning

The Living Learning program combines flexible learning with mental health support, outreach case coordination support and adventure activities. It is designed to welcome disengaged students back into school and provide the opportunity for them to go on to a positive pathway of their choice.

In 2022, the Living Learning team at Hester Hornbrook worked with 96 students, providing the first of three years of support in education, engagement and health. The education team provides a range of supports, including individually tailored education interventions, learning tools, focused literacy and numeracy, and staff professional development. The engagement team provides case coordination and support to ensure students have the right people around them, so they can manage anything preventing them from getting to school and being able to focus on their study. The allied health team focuses on providing students with direct therapeutic interventions, assessments and reports. They also provide secondary consultation and referrals to external services.

The Living Learning program also operates an extensive adventure experience program which is designed to expose students to natural environments and provides a safe place to extend their physical capabilities and sense of self-achievement.

RECOMMENDATION 8: To provide a fairer education system for all, the next National Schools Reform Agreement needs to ensure a flexible, individualised, therapeutic and supportive educational environment is provided to all young people. Wellbeing must be considered before educational outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION 9: The next National School Reform Agreement needs to ensure all schools are equipped to provide better wellbeing support by:

a) Ensuring multidisciplinary teams work collaboratively in schools, establishing and implementing a practice framework in which these roles are integrated with the teaching staff.

b) Ensuring that all section of government work together to allow sufficient workforce for all schools to have a contracted partnership with a community services organisation to provide specialised wellbeing support, with warm referrals for students whose wellbeing needs are too complex to be met by the school in isolation.

WHAT IS NEEDED FROM SCHOOLS, SYSTEMS, GOVERNMENT AND THE COMMUNITY TO DELIVER THIS?

Students experiencing social and emotional disability, including mental ill-health, often struggle to physically attend school and remain engaged in their learning. Over the past 20 years there has been increasing recognition that mainstream schools have limited capacity and resources to support such students and of the need for flexible, applied and remote learning options so these students can continue their studies, complete their education and have the sort of life opportunities most people take for granted.

Independently registered Special Assistance Schools, like Hester Hornbrook, receive funding from the Federal Government for students who only physically attend the classroom, often referred to as ‘attendance rates’ or ‘bums on seats’ funding. This funding through the National Consistent Collection of Data provides the broad range of wrap-around services for the extensive level of social and emotional disability that students experience. The extensive level of adjustments provided to each individual student in terms of their learning and wellbeing allows a multi-disciplinary team to work to achieve positive pathways for young people.

However, this on-site attendance needed to meet the Federal Government’s Census requirements is beyond many of these students despite their, and the schools’, best efforts. For some students, their significant mental health and trauma experiences and/or their current state of crisis means that they are

unable to present to campus during the Census period. The important wellbeing and learning work that is done to prepare and transition highly disengaged students to enter the school environment (through assertive outreach), is not considered for Census funding as there is no physical attendance at a school site. These barriers prevent some young people from accessing, participating, and completing their education.

For education to be truly inclusive and accessible, there is a need to review current funding arrangements, especially for independently registered Special Assistance Schools, to encourage more flexible and remote learning options for students who require further support to re-engage physically with their school and classroom environment. This includes redefining 'participation and attendance' for the purposes of Census requirements, like the temporary changes introduced during the lock down periods during the pandemic.

These steps will allow more young people to participate in and complete their education, including students who experience mental health issues that impact on their ability to learn in traditional classroom settings.

RECOMMENDATION 10: For education to be truly inclusive and accessible, the next National School Reform Agreement needs to review current funding arrangements, especially for independently registered Special Assistance Schools, to include more flexible and remote learning options for students who require further support to re-engage physically with their school and classroom environment.

WELLBEING TARGETS

Hester Hornbrook strongly supports the notion of measuring wellbeing outcomes, and in principle, supports the inclusion of a wellbeing target. However, as stated in the consultation paper, school specific factors account for 40-50 per cent of the variability in student achievement. Schools alone are not responsible for student wellbeing outcomes, however, Hester Hornbrook supports a wellbeing for learning approach to education.

Regardless of the decision to set wellbeing targets and/or measure outcomes, careful consideration must be given to the implicit risk created in doing so. In setting targets, further barriers and discrimination may be faced by young people, such as schools favouring students with higher wellbeing and lower support needs. In considering targets, schools need to be provided with the resources required to meet the individual needs of each young person in their school, no two students are the same, their educational skills and lives are all different and impact in different ways on their ability to engage in the teaching and learning offered in the school environment. Mental health services, educational intervention programs and community perceptions of schools and the work they do must be altered.

STUDENT VOICE AND SURVEYING STUDENTS

As a part of the HOPE model, student voice and choice are a key component of a healing oriented approach. There is great benefit in listening to student voice and ensuring student agency to help understand their perceptions of safety and belonging at school. Further to this, there is benefit in regularly (at the end of each semester) collecting data in the following domains to give students a voice and choice in the way their education is delivered as well as their experiences:

- Safety
- Belonging
- Respect
- Motivation to learn
- Satisfaction with class size
- Satisfaction with teaching support team
- Satisfaction with learning progress
- Satisfaction with teaching style.

RECOMMENDATION 11: To improve student outcomes, the next National School Reform Agreement needs to give students a voice in the way their education is delivered as well as their experiences of the school environment. This is achieved through regularly surveying students about their school experience and using the data to inform decision making in schools.

FUNDING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Hester Hornbook is a registered independent school, but it is different to most other schools in the independent school sector. It is free for all students to attend, with no fees collected from any student or family to attend the school.

It is further classified as a Special Assistance School, established for the main purpose of providing instruction for students with social and emotional challenges or disabilities. Each individual Hester Hornbrook students requires educational adjustments, flexibility and adaptation to support their ongoing learning and wellbeing. Often these students have disengaged entirely from education and were at risk of falling through systemic gaps if they had not been re-engaged by Hester Hornbrook.

The students at Hester Hornbrook are some of the most vulnerable students in our communities and without appropriate intervention, will go on to require a high level of support across a range of public services including health, justice and social security. Hester Hornbrook students, and many other students who attend a Special Assistance School, are therefore different to those attending traditional independent schools (often referred to as 'private schools').

Despite this, in policy terms, Hester Hornbrook is typically treated the same as other traditional independent schools that serve a much less vulnerable student cohort and have access to far greater funding from the collection school fees. This classification of Hester Hornbrook and other Special Assistance Schools, as simply another independent school that should have the same policy responses as other traditional independent schools, means that our students become invisible to policy responses that are intended to support them. This includes education and funding reforms by state and territory governments.

A key example of this are Victorian State Government programs that deliver preventative health support to students, such as Doctors in Schools or School Dental Vans. These services are only delivered in Government schools, meaning Hester Hornbrook is ineligible for them, despite our students having arguably some of the highest needs in the state for these services. As these are often barriers to education, Hester Hornbrook uses whatever means it can to ensure dental services, doctors, eye test, haircuts etc are provided to their students to allow them to access quality education and wellbeing supports. This often means relying on short term philanthropic funding.

Independent Special Assistance Schools are generally overlooked in education reform when compared to both government and non-government or 'private' schools and therefore it is critical that school funding reflects valid measures of student need. If the Australian education system continues to neglect the schools looking after arguably the most vulnerable students in the country, these students will continue to be left behind.

RECOMMENDATION 12: To increase education choice, the next National Schools Reform Agreement needs to ensure the Federal Government's model of non-government school funding including reflects valid measures of student need, so that Special Assistance Schools such as Hester Hornbrook remain an accessible and viable education pathway for disengaged learners.

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