Submission to:

Parliament of Victoria
Inquiry into the potential for developing opportunities for schools to become a focus for promoting healthy community living

July 2009
Parliamentary inquiry into the potential for developing opportunities for schools to become a focus for promoting healthy community living

About beyondblue: the national depression initiative

beyondblue: the national depression initiative is a national, independent, not-for-profit organisation working to address issues associated with depression, anxiety and related substance use disorders in Australia. Of particular relevance to the Inquiry into the potential for developing opportunities for schools to become a focus for promoting healthy community living in Victoria which is complementary to beyondblue’s strong objective to develop and implement depression and anxiety prevention and early intervention programs in the school setting.

beyondblue has five priority areas that it structures its work around. These are:

1. Increasing community awareness of depression, anxiety and related substance misuse disorders;
2. Providing people living with depression and their carers with information on the illness and effective treatment options and promoting their needs and experiences with policy makers and healthcare providers;
3. Developing depression prevention and early intervention programs;
4. Improving depression training and support for general practitioners and other healthcare professionals;
5. Initiating and supporting depression-related research.

beyondblue works in partnership with schools, health services, workplaces, universities, media and community organisations, as well as people living with depression and their carers, to bring together their expertise. Specific population groups that beyondblue targets are young people, Indigenous peoples, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people living in rural areas, and the elderly.

Depression and anxiety in young people

Depression has its peak incidence in mid-to-late adolescence (Sawyer, et al., 2000), therefore, significant investment is required in the prevention of depression, anxiety and emotional problems in the school years. Low self-esteem as a predictor of adolescent depression is supported by longitudinal research which shows that children who perceive themselves as academically, socially, or physically incompetent are more vulnerable to depression than are children who perceive themselves as competent (Cole, Jacquez, & Maschman, 2001). Such beliefs develop during middle childhood and early adolescence and arise from feedback children receive from their parents, teachers and peers (Cole, Martin, & Powers, 1997).

Anxiety experienced by young people in their early and middle years is a pathway to depression in later adolescence. The school arena is a key setting for social and emotional development. Anxiety can increase dramatically during the transition from primary school to secondary school, and is a known marker for a large increase in emotional problems. Furthermore, recurrent bullying or victimisation in Year 8 also predicts symptoms of depression and anxiety in Year 9, especially for girls (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001).
Indigenous children and young people

It is well understood that the standard of health of Indigenous children is far lower than that of the majority of Australia. The depression, anxiety, and substance use problems encountered in remote communities and cities represent a significant challenge for all governments and service providers. Complex and endemic social problems (eg. unemployment, poverty, lack of education) coupled with limited service delivery approaches and workforce shortages warrants urgent work into the mental health needs of Indigenous children.

Schools as a setting to implement mental health strategies

Over the past decade, schools and the health and education sectors have become increasingly aware of the impact mental health problems such as anxiety and depression have on students and the broader school community. It is evident that many staff want to know more about these problems and how they can support students experiencing difficulties. While professional development opportunities may be limited, there are websites that provide useful information and resources on supporting young people with mental health issues, for example www.youthbeyondblue.com.

In addition to supporting students experiencing mental health difficulties, increasingly schools are adopting the view that they should play an active role in supporting the social and emotional development of all their students. Schools have been doing this implicitly for many years through such practices as pastoral care groups and the conscious role modelling of teachers, however this is now being extended to formal curriculum approaches with the introduction of programs ranging from the broad-based (eg. resiliency) to the more specific skill sets (eg. managing exam stress and anti bullying).

Enhancing the social and emotional skills of students has some important pay offs for the whole school community. Students with better social and emotional skills are more able to cope with the stressors of daily life, have better relationships with parents, teachers, and peers, and do better academically. Such skills also make it less likely that a student will experience a significant mental health problem in the future.

beyondblue’s youth focus and school-based programs

beyondblue’s youth agenda concentrates on preventing depression at different ages in a young person’s life at school, home or in the community. It is built on strong partnerships and an evidence-based approach.

beyondblue supports a public health approach to depression in young people with a focus on the need to strongly shift common and modifiable risk and protective factors in favourable directions in order to prevent mental health problems. This approach may target individual factors, but usually aims to influence broader social determinants, specifically the settings in which young people spend their time. beyondblue supports strong school based, parenting, family and community connections throughout its prevention and early intervention projects. For example, the KidsMatter Primary Schools Initiative provides a capacity for schools to engage in preventative strategies to support the specific mental health and wellbeing needs of their student population (see KidsMatter section below).

Evidence-driven, developmentally appropriate beyondblue programs (described below) have been designed to promote positive environments and teach life skills that can potentially decrease prevalence, reduce severity, and delay the onset of depression.
KidsMatter is the first national primary school mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention initiative developed in collaboration with the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, beyondblue, the Australian Psychological Society, the Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council, and the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund. The KidsMatter Initiative aims to improve the mental health and well-being of primary school students, reduce mental health problems among students (eg. anxiety, depression and behavioural problems) and achieve greater support and assistance for students at risk or experiencing mental health problems.

The Initiative involves the people who have a significant influence on children’s lives – parents, families, caregivers, teachers and community groups – in making a positive difference for children’s mental health during this important developmental period.

The KidsMatter Initiative aims to:

a) improve the mental health and wellbeing of primary school students
b) reduce mental health problems amongst students, and
c) achieve greater support for students experiencing mental health problems.

Drawing on the latest international research, the KidsMatter framework and implementation focus on four key areas where schools can really make a difference. These comprise:

Component 1: A positive school community
A positive school community enables staff, students, families and community members to work together to support children’s wellbeing. It promotes feelings of belonging and connectedness, which are very important for positive mental health.

Component 2: Social and emotional learning for students
Social and emotional learning is about learning how to manage feelings, handle relationships and solve problems. By systematically teaching children social and emotional skills, schools can support children’s positive mental health and benefit their learning.

Component 3: Parenting support and education
Schools can play an important role in helping to provide parents and carers with information regarding children’s development and wellbeing. They can also facilitate access to services that provide parenting support.

Component 4: Early intervention for students experiencing mental health difficulties
By being aware of the kinds of mental health difficulties that affect children and what kinds of support are available, schools can help children and their families to access early intervention services and get the help they need.

Pilot Phase 2006-2008
Since it began in late 2006, the KidsMatter Initiative has been developed and trialed in over 100 schools across Australia.
The following schools in Victoria participated in the pilot phase:

**Group 1 – 2006**
- Christ the King Primary School - Braybrook
- Hastings Primary School - Hastings
- Monmia Primary School - Keilor Downs
- Sacred Heart Primary School - Fitzroy
- St Joseph's - Trafalgar
- St Bernadette's Primary School - North Sunshine
- St Christopher's School - Airport West
- St Vincent de Paul Primary School - Morwell
- Tootgarook Primary School - Rye
- Upper Ferntree Gully Primary School - Upper Ferntree Gully

**Group 2 – 2007**
- Benalla Primary School - Benalla
- Corio Primary School - Corio
- Lumen Christi - Churchill
- North Brunswick Primary School - West Brunswick
- Southvale Primary School - Noble Park
- St Andrew's Catholic Primary School - Werribee
- St Mary's Primary School - Echuca
- St John Vianney's School - Parkdale East
- St Therese's Primary School - Camborne
- St Louis De Montfort Primary - Aspendale

During this pilot phase, these schools were provided with:

- a comprehensive, systemic framework
- a detailed whole-school implementation process
- project officer support to guide implementation and provide school-based professional learning
- a range of supporting resources for schools to address student mental health issues.

Using these tools, schools in the KidsMatter pilot developed and implemented a coordinated set of strategies to address the specific mental health and wellbeing needs of their students.

**KidsMatter in 2009**

From the very beginning the response to KidsMatter from participating schools has been extremely encouraging, and, over time, it has become evident that many more primary schools would like to participate in KidsMatter. Given the increasing demand, the KidsMatter Consortium have decided to use 2009 as an opportunity to seek greater sector involvement to increase the number of schools participating in KidsMatter in the future.

While it is currently unknown how many schools will want to participate in these 2009 dissemination trials, all Australian schools will have access to some of the key materials underpinning KidsMatter. Access to these materials/resources will enable schools to learn more about KidsMatter and begin to engage with the KidsMatter framework and web-based resources to further enhance schools’ capacity to address student mental health and wellbeing.

In 2009, the KidsMatter Consortium will explore further partnerships with education and/or health jurisdictions to increase the number of schools that can formally undertake KidsMatter. An independent evaluation of the Initiative will be available in October 2010.
beyondblue Schools Research Initiative

When beyondblue began in 2000, one of its early major priorities was to develop a curriculum program for junior secondary school students that would teach skills for managing the ongoing challenges of life. The skills and capacities the program was to target were those that research indicated were ‘protective’ or made them less vulnerable to depression. A team from the University of Queensland’s School of Psychology was contracted to develop the program because of their expertise in developing large-scale school-based prevention programs. With input from other health and education professionals, they developed the beyondblue Classroom Program, a comprehensive 30-session curriculum program delivered to students over a 3-year period beginning in Year 8.

Research indicates that thinking ‘styles’ contribute to a person’s vulnerability to experiencing depression and the extent to which it is maintained. Specifically, young people with negative cognitions about themselves, the world and their future are more vulnerable. The beyondblue schools classroom program was developed with the view to enhancing students’ thinking around themselves, their world and future though the development of six key senses. These are:

1. Sense of Self-worth (knowledge of and belief in one’s strengths, skills, and abilities - an acceptance of one’s inherent value)
2. Sense of Belonging (feeling valued, needed and accepted - being connected meaningfully to a social network)
3. Sense of Control (belief that one has the skills and ability to cope with life challenges and to manage one’s own emotions)
4. Sense of Purpose (capacity to make sense of the world and to perceive some meaning in one’s life)
5. Sense of Future (hopefulness about the future enabling us to act purposely and positively)
6. Sense of Humour (being able to see the lighter and ‘funnier’ side of life – including one’s own foibles).

Underpinning the development of these six senses is a number of core ‘thinking’ skills such as emotion recognition and regulation, effective communication; conflict resolution; helpful thinking; challenging unhelpful thoughts; setting realistic expectations; life problem solving and decision making; planning; time management; scheduling pleasant events; recognition and understanding of mental health issues; and readiness and capacity to seek help for self and others. These were built in to the program and delivered in an hierarchical fashion over the three years.

Under the leadership of South Australian academic/researcher Professor Michael Sawyer, this multi-level, comprehensive, schools-based initiative for the prevention of depression in young people was trialled over three years from 2002-2005 in 50 schools across South Australia, Queensland and Victoria.

Victorian schools involved in the partnership were:

- Aquinas College, Ringwood
- Eaglehawk College, Eaglehawk
- Firbank Grammar School, Brighton
- Leongatha Secondary College
- Lowanna College, Moe
- MacKillop Catholic Regional College, Werribee
- Mazenod College, Mulgrave
- Northcote High School
- Parade College, Bundoora
- Patterson River Secondary College, Carrum
- Strathmore Secondary College
- Sunshine College
- Upwey High School
- Western Heights College, Geelong
Twenty-five schools received the intervention and 25 schools formed a comparison group. The intervention included ‘whole of school programs’, community forums, a pathways component and a classroom curriculum program. This comprehensive approach aimed to increase resilience in young people leading to more positive mental health, social health, and school health outcomes.

For evaluation purposes, teachers were asked to deliver the program in a standardised manner and were provided with detailed teacher manuals, student workbooks and DVD materials. Upon the completion of the trial in early 2006, beyondblue has made these materials freely available to schools through its website. Demand for the materials has steadily grown over this time supporting the view that schools are increasingly looking to develop the social and emotional skills of students. Since mid 2006, over 200 Victorian schools and education institutions have ordered these curriculum materials.

Dissemination of materials and resources

beyondblue is currently updating its high schools curriculum program. The program will be repackaged under the six senses and will provide schools with additional resources and greater flexibility. Schools will continue to have electronic access to the original curriculum program.

beyondblue Schools DVD

The Tackling Depression in Schools DVD provides information about depression aimed at helping students, teachers and parents manage and prevent the illness in the school community.

Program One Understanding Depression for Parents and Teachers is hosted by Jessica Rowe and features interviews with several people who have experienced depression including beyondblue Board Member and actor Garry McDonald. There are also interviews with a psychiatrist, a GP and a segment about how one school has already implemented a depression-awareness program.

The two youth programs were recorded in front of an audience of teenagers and feature a panel discussion between a psychiatrist, a youth mental health advocate and a young woman who has experienced depression. There are several dramatised case studies created by young people which are designed to promote discussion about the signs and symptoms of depression and how to help someone. There are also interviews with high profile people who have experienced depression and anxiety - actor Krista Vendy, former AFL footballer Glen Bowyer and guitarist Swifty from the Melbourne-based band, the Fray.

Produced by Schools’ Television in association with beyondblue, the DVD includes notes for teachers and parents and is available free of charge from www.beyondblue.org.au.

Youthbeyondblue website and campaign

The prevalence rates of depression and anxiety in mid-to-late adolescence are a major concern, however, it is understood that if these disorders are recognised and treated early, this may increase the chances of a better long-term outcome (Jorm, et al., 1997). Early recognition and help-seeking is substantially assisted if young people and their support network (eg, teachers, family, friends) know about mental disorders, the type of help available, and where to access help (Kelly, Jorm, & Wright, 2007; Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007).

Drawing on this evidence, beyondblue recently launched a multi-pronged youth campaign with a series of TV, cinema, radio and print advertisements and its new Youthbeyondblue website (www.youthbeyondblue.com) aimed at raising awareness of the signs and symptoms of depression, anxiety and associated drug and alcohol problems among young people.
Youthbeyondblue national advertising targeting students with depression and anxiety

The redesigned Youthbeyondblue website includes a wide range of new fact sheets on depression and anxiety-related topics, including how to help a friend, effective treatments, alcohol and depression, cannabis use, bullying and eating disorders.

Engagement through art, dance and community events

Rock Eisteddfod
Youthbeyondblue has proudly collaborated with the Rock Eisteddfod Challenge for several years to raise awareness about depression and anxiety in young people. The Rock Eisteddfod Challenge is a performing arts event incorporating dance, drama and design which provides Australian secondary school students with an opportunity to express their creativity through music and dance by producing an eight minute performance. The focus of the Rock Eisteddfod Challenge is on young people being the best they can be without the use of tobacco, alcohol or other drugs.

The Rock Eisteddfod Challenge in 2008 staged around 45 live events, travelling 50,000 kms across Australia. Youthbeyondblue materials were distributed to all participating schools including those in Victoria. Youthbeyondblue Crew members also ran information stalls at the Grand Final Show in Melbourne and other capital cities.

Indigenous Hip Hop Projects
beyondblue has funded Indigenous Hip Hop Projects to engage young people and increase their mental health literacy and access to health services using Hip Hop dance workshops and performance. Throughout 2007 and 2008, Indigenous Hip Hop Projects delivered dance workshops to over 90 Indigenous communities in metropolitan, rural and remote areas including the Kimberley and Pilbara regions, Walgett and Arnhem Land, Kununurra and Halls Creek, as well as metropolitan locations such as Melbourne.

The team from Indigenous Hip Hop Projects (IHHP) hold workshops in break-dancing, hip hop and rap at schools and local community centres. The workshops provide an environment where young people can express themselves, promoting confidence, leadership, teamwork, self-respect and respect for their culture, friends and elders. The workshops also deliver beyondblue’s key messages about depression (Look, Listen,
Talk and Seek Help Together) and are aimed at building relationships between young people and local health and youth services.

In all communities, Indigenous Hip Hop Projects link with the local Aboriginal Medical Services and Youth support services to ensure that local young people can identify and engage with ongoing support structures.

**2009 Communities Initiative**

During 2009, Indigenous Hip Hop Projects will conduct hip hop workshops and performances, communicating Youthbeyondblue key messages in up to 60 communities in all States and Territories. Through their work they will link with schools, youth and health services to assist mental health support networks for young Indigenous people in rural and remote areas.

In partnership with Indigenous Coordination Centres, Government departments (State and Federal) philanthropic organisations, schools, mining companies and other corporations, the Projects will conduct regional leadership camps designed to identify, train and support young hip hop artists from communities to become volunteer youth leaders.

A comprehensive and rigorous evaluation will be undertaken by an external evaluator to assess the long-term value outcomes of this project.

**Conclusion**

*beyondblue* is committed to strategies that prevent or minimise the impact of depression, anxiety and related disorders in young people and has initiated and supported work to address these issues, particularly in the schools setting. The impact of depression and anxiety (including the impact upon families) continues to be a high priority for *beyondblue*. *beyondblue* will continue to build upon and expand its work in the areas of early intervention, prevention and research.

*beyondblue* welcomes the opportunity to work with the Victorian Government and key stakeholders to advance the responses provided to young people in schools at risk of depression and anxiety and to share the evaluation results of our activities.

**Recommendations**

*beyondblue* strongly recommends the following:

- Provide a range of mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention programs in a variety of relevant settings, particularly family and school settings, for example:
  - Recognise and provide transition programs for all students and support for “high needs” students transferring from primary to secondary school.
  - Provide ongoing support for families and parents, with a focus on effective parenting and child development (for example, promote access to evaluated materials such as KidsMatter information and *beyondblue* Secondary Schools materials, through Victorian Parenting Service).
- Offer a range of programs that target a broad range of risk-taking behaviours and poor health outcomes, including drug and alcohol use, early sexual activity, conduct disorders, depression and suicide through Victoria-wide education sectors.
- Increase help seeking amongst parents and students through increased information sharing and access to resources.
- Victoria-wide participation in the KidsMatter Initiative.
References


