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

Macedon Ranges Shire Council
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Thank you for the opportunity to comment. As a local council we were invited to comment on a number of specific issues relating to health promotion\(^1\). This submission addresses these issues under the corresponding aspect of the parliamentary inquiry terms of reference.

a. existing activities carried out by schools to promote holistic healthy living within their school communities involving healthy eating, active lifestyles, sun smart awareness and appreciation of the effects of harmful substances;

- The role of your council in health promotion within your community

  **Key strategic directions**

  One of the key themes in the *Macedon Ranges Shire Council Plan 2009-2013* relates to the promotion of healthy, vibrant and resilient communities.

  Council’s *Health & Wellbeing Plan 2009-2013* includes objectives relating to healthy food and physical activity as well as the broader health and wellbeing needs of different groups of residents (older people; families with children; youth; people with a disability; commuters; people on low incomes).

  Council’s *Heatwave Plan 2009* aims to educate residents about the dangers of very high temperatures and the simple measures they can take to minimise the effects of hot weather. The Heatwave Plan has a focus on preparedness and prevention as well as on emergency response and recovery.

  Other strategic plans and policies draw on health promoting principles and practices, for example the *Family and Children’s Strategy 2009-2012; Guidelines for Residential Subdivision in the Macedon Ranges Shire: Designing in Health & Wellbeing; Leisure Strategy Plan 2006*; and the multi-agency *Macedon Ranges Ageing Well Strategy 2010-2015* among others.

**PCP Integrated Health Promotion**

Macedon Ranges Shire Council is a member of the Central Victorian Health Alliance (CVHA) and is one of seven partner agencies working on actions arising from the *CVHA Integrated Health Promotion Plan 2009-2012*. The priorities of the plan include promoting physical activity and increasing social connectedness. For example, Council’s Recreation Department works in partnership with Cobaw Community Health and Macedon Ranges Health Service to promote and provide physical activity opportunities for older adults (including Lifeball, strength training and gentle exercise groups).

**Early childhood services**

Maternal and Child Health Services (MCH) are provided by Council across the Shire. MCH offers assessment of the health and development of children from birth to six years as well as information to support maternal health and wellbeing. MCH nurses are also able to offer advice and information on a range of topics including breastfeeding and nutrition; post-natal depression support; child safety and accident prevention; and immunisation.

\(^1\) Letter inviting submissions from Chair of Education and Training Committee dated 17 May 2010.
Promoting health eating guidelines and practices within early childhood settings is one of the actions identified in Council’s Family and Children’s Strategy 2009-2012. This is occurring informally in Council-managed kindergartens throughout the Shire. The option of kindergartens joining the Kids – ‘Go for your life’ healthy eating and active play initiative and working towards becoming Awarded Services will be explored. Council-managed kindergartens also adhere to a Sun Protection Policy which promotes sun smart awareness.

**Immunisation**

Council’s Environmental Health Unit provides infant, child and adult immunisations on a monthly basis in venues across the Shire. The vaccination program for Year 7 and 10 students is also organised by Council through sessions conducted at secondary schools throughout the Shire.

**Public health services**

Public health services offered by Council relate to food safety and Food Act Registration; Public Health and Wellbeing Act Registration; safe needle disposal; tobacco legislation; wastewater management and septic tank permits.

- The extent to which the health promotion initiatives included in your Municipal Public Health Plan target schools, and any opportunities to expand school involvement in municipal initiatives

Health promotion initiatives included in Macedon Ranges Shire Council’s Health & Wellbeing Plan 2009-2013 do not currently target schools. There is scope to work in partnership with schools on a number of objectives relating to healthy food and physical activity as well as the broader health and wellbeing needs of children and young people.

- Any experience you have had with health promotion programs within schools (for young people and/or their families)

**Live4Life Project: Actively promoting rural students’ mental health**

The Macedon Ranges Live4Life Project is a unique partnership between 5 local secondary schools, 2 community health services and Council’s Youth Development Unit. The project’s approach to promoting mental health focuses on prevention and education.

The Live4Life Project currently concentrates on Year 8 students across participating schools. Targeting this year level maximises learning without the emotional and social impacts associated with settling into secondary school in Year 7 or the greater curriculum demands of Years 11 and 12. Working with this age group also allows for learning to occur prior to the reported developmental challenges students face, including the increase in prevalence of mental health issues at Year 9 level.

The premise behind the Live4Life Project is that “health promotion...is a broader concept that health education”\(^2\). The project therefore extends beyond consideration of the school curriculum to encompass the school culture and physical environment and external partnerships with health services and the community.

This school-based mental health promotion initiative aims to provide a full continuum of promotion strategies including “enhancing environments...promoting social and emotional

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learning and life skills, preventing emotional and behavioural problems, and early identification and intervention in these problems\(^3\).

**Kids – ‘Go for your life’**

Promoting health eating guidelines and practices within primary school settings is one of the actions identified in Council’s *Family and Children’s Strategy 2009-2012*. This is closely aligned with the action in the *CVHA Integrated Health Promotion Plan* relating to working with schools to implement the Kids – ‘Go for your life’ healthy eating and active play initiative. Work on this action has recently commenced and is being led by the local community health services, Cobaw Community Health and Macedon Ranges Health Service. It is expected that Council will become involved as appropriate.

b. **successful programs which have been instituted in schools in other states or internationally;**

- Any best practice models for health promotion currently operating within your local community

  The *Live4Life* Project is a unique partnership project between local secondary schools and community services. This is the first time secondary schools have joined together in partnership with community leaders to address the state of our young people’s mental health. Active partners include Braemar College, Gisborne Secondary College, Kyneton Secondary College (encompassing community-based VCAL), Macedon Grammar and Sacred Heart College as well as Council’s Youth Development Unit, Cobaw Community Health and Macedon Ranges Health Service.

c. **identify whether it is appropriate for the State to encourage schools to extend health programs to be directed at the broader school community and, if so, what the most effective and efficient approaches are;**

  What is meant by ‘the broader school community’?

  Does this mean using schools as a springboard for health promotion into the community?

  Any extension of health programs would require commensurate resources.

- **The suitability of schools as a setting for health promotion programs and initiatives**

  Education and health are linked: Healthy students learn better and young people who attend school are more likely to experience good health. Therefore the promotion of health in schools is important.

  The question is how to promote health in schools. There is evidence to suggest that “using a whole-school approach rather than primarily a classroom learning approach”\(^4\) is the most effective method.

  The challenge is also for the curriculum to reflect health promoting opportunities and messages across subject areas rather than ‘silloing’ health and wellbeing into the pastoral care role of the school. This requires a greater understanding about the affect of health and illness on student learning outcomes within the education sector.

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\(^3\)Weist & Murray, ‘Advancing School Mental Health Promotion Globally’, *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, Inaugural, October 2007, p3.

\(^4\)St Leger, Young, Blanchard & Perry, p6.
d. opportunities for linking with community leaders and forming partnerships with business and community organisations;

- Whether there are any opportunities for schools to link with community leaders and/or to form partnerships with business and community organisations and how this can be supported/achieved

Clearly there are opportunities for schools to form linkages or partnerships with community leaders, business and community organisations: from consciousness raising efforts to more concrete activities that promote health. Creating or strengthening links between schools and communities can enhance students’ broader knowledge and provide ‘real world’ experience. Indeed, one of the principles of a Health Promoting School is collaboration with parents and the local community. However, connections need to be appropriate and carefully managed to protect the best interests of students.

There is also a great need for inter-sectoral collaboration between differing professions to avoid professional siloing of roles.

- Whether existing partnership models (e.g. Primary Care Partnerships, School Focussed Youth Service, Community Health organisations) could be utilised to implement a state-wide health promoting schools model

Existing partnership models could be utilised to implement a state-wide health promoting schools model but schools would need to be involved from the outset – schools are not currently active members of Primary Care Partnerships for example.

Schools’ understanding of partnership with community is currently not well understood or implemented within the school environment.

- Any factors essential to the success of partnerships involving the health and education sectors and local councils

  **Mutual understanding**

Challenges experienced in the development of partnerships in the Live4Life Project arose from the silos created in health and education that inhibit the two areas from working constructively together. It was felt that this barrier stems from the way undergraduate education is delivered, the lack of flexibility in the school curriculum and the fact that teachers lack professional development time to develop external relations. “Interdisciplinary training at the pre-service level is extremely rare” and work in schools is inherently interdisciplinary.

“The education sector has certain language and concepts, which have different meanings to those in the health and other sectors, and vice versa.” This can create tensions and misunderstandings. One solution to this barrier is to work on “mutual understanding and respect for each others’ conceptual frameworks and associated language.”

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5International Union for Health Promotion and Education (IUHPE) *Achieving Health Promoting Schools: Guidelines for Promoting Health in Schools*
6Weist & Murray, p7.
7International Union for Health Promotion and Education (IUHPE)
8St Leger, Young, Blanchard & Perry, p3.
Adequate resources
The success of partnerships also relies on sufficient resourcing. This includes time and funding. Are teachers given adequate time to learn or to make the linkages necessary to support health promoting schools? The Live4Life project asks that schools provide nominated teachers with 14 hours professional development time to undertake Youth Mental Health First Aid Training. “Some school health initiatives in the past have been funded over a short project base...” when “health promotion outcomes occur in the medium to long-term” – therefore resulting in inhibited health promotion development and sustainability.

Realistic expectations
As mentioned above health promotion outcomes are not immediate. Strategies including partnership work need to be realistic as “substantial change requires 3-5 years”.

An Identified Need
In order for effective school and community partnerships to be formed a ‘need to address’ must be identified or supported by the school environment. Projects/programs ‘imposed’ on schools without discussion of local need are set to fail.

e. existing broader health promotion policies and activities; and

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Depression awareness event
In 2009 Macedon Ranges Shire Council in association with beyondblue, One in Five, the Sunrise Foundation, Cobaw Community Health, Macedon Ranges Health Service and V-Line helped organise a depression awareness evening aimed at men aged 18 to 45 years called “Let’s Break the Silence”. There were several key speakers on the night including Nathan Thompson and Wayne Schwass both ex-North Melbourne football players and entertainment included comedian Damian Callinan and live music from Tim Rogers (You am I) and the Dead Salesmen. Show bags were distributed which included mental health information kits, contact details of local providers and emergency contact numbers. Approximately 300 people attended the event and feedback was extremely positive. This event has been nominated for the Health and Well Being Category in the 2010 National Awards for Local Government. Another “Let’s Break the Silence” event is planned for 2010.

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10 St Leger, Young, Blanchard & Perry, p7.
11 Hardy, p4.
• Best practice state and federal government policies and programs (past or present) surrounding health promotion

**beyondblue**

*beyondblue* is a bipartisan initiative of the Australian, state and territory governments which aims to raise community awareness about depression and reduce stigma associated with the illness. This program works in partnership with health services, schools, workplaces, universities, media and community organisations, as well as people living with depression. The *beyondblue* schools research initiative is a research partnership between school systems, local communities, the health sector and academics. These groups have come together to examine how school communities can prevent depression in young people.

**KidsMatter**

*KidsMatter* aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children, reduce mental health problems amongst children, and achieve greater support for children experiencing mental health difficulties, and their families. It includes *KidsMatter Early Childhood*, designed for implementation in preschools and long day care; and *KidsMatter Primary Schools*, designed for implementation in Australian primary schools. Each initiative involves the people who have a significant influence on children’s lives – parents, carers, families, child care professionals, teachers and community groups – in making a positive difference for children’s mental health.

**MindMatters**

*MindMatters* is a national mental health initiative for secondary schools funded by the Federal Department of Health and Ageing. It is a professional development program supporting Australian secondary schools to promote and protect the mental health, and social and emotional wellbeing of all members of school communities.

**Go for your life**

*Go for your life* is a Victorian Government initiative which aims to promote healthy eating and increase levels of physical activity.

f. **how school-based activities could relate and coordinate with these to maximise impact and efficiency.**

For maximum impact health issues should be explored within the context of students’ lives outside the school environment. Ideally a consistency of approach is needed “across the school and between the school, home and wider community”\(^\text{12}\).

Schools need to be involved in broader health promotion policies and activities from the outset so that they have some sense of ownership over the health promotion activities (rather than having the agenda set by an external body).

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\(^{12}\) St Leger, Young, Blanchard & Perry, p6.
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