

discussion

WHAT HELPS STUDENTS WITH SUPPORT NEEDS CONNECT TO SCHOOL?

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Aim:

To encourage discussion about what connects students with support needs in mental health and wellbeing to school, in the context of the local school community setting.

Groups who may be interested in this activity:

Members of a school's staff or others interested in strengthening school's capacity to help students connect to secondary school and/or student support.

Eg whole staff groups, pastoral care/student support staff, learning support teams, discipline teams, executive teams, faculty groups, school community groups working on projects where student connection is important.

Materials:

The following materials could be used to support the discussion.

They are available on the www.agca.com.au website.

- Powerpoint: What helps students connect to school?
- Information sheet 3: Students with support needs in mental health and wellbeing: Unheard Voices
- Information sheet 4: Staff Voices: What helps students with high mental health support needs connect to school?

Planning a staff discussion:

Preview the PowerPoint, information sheets 3 and 4 and questions below.

Decide which segments of the PowerPoint and items in the Discussion Sheet will best suit your purpose and the group.

Make copies of the Discussion sheet for group members.

Some options for different kinds of sessions

- **Sections A and B** will provide participants with information about a review of research on what young people with support needs say about engagement with school; *Students with support needs in mental health and wellbeing: Unheard Voices* research;
- **Sections A and C** will provide participants with information from *Staff Voices: What helps students with support needs in mental health and wellbeing connect to school?*
- **Sections A and B,C, D** will provide participants with information from both studies and looks at their implications for school practice.

Background information for discussion activity:

The following four areas emerged as strong themes in helping students connect to school:

1. Reaching out to students with support needs to help them connect to school should form part of a planned school strategy with designated interested and capable staff working in a collegial team.
2. Increasing mental health literacy amongst staff and peers helps students with support needs and gives staff more confidence to manage students supportively
3. A welcoming, caring school environment that values diversity and personal safety and acts decisively against bullying, harassment and discrimination is a great basis for connection for students and staff
4. Young people would like to have student voices heard and valued much more at school

The table incorporates statements related to these themes for reflection on school practice. You should feel free to select the items that have most relevance for your group.

activity

Discuss with someone you haven't spoken to in the last 2 days:

Think of a past experience in your childhood or adolescence where you felt connected. What was it? Who was involved in helping this connection?

Group discussion:

What are general connectors for our students?

Was there anything surprising/reassuring/interesting from the PowerPoint presentation?

Did you want to take issue with anything?

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<p>Themes related to what helps students with support needs connect to school</p> <p>1. STAFF SUPPORTING STUDENTS</p>	<p>Do we already do this?</p> <p>Y/N</p>	<p>How effective is our practice?</p> <p>1_2_3_4_5</p> <p>high low</p>	<p>What else could we do?</p>	<p>Priority for further action</p> <p>1_2_3_4_5</p> <p>high low</p>	<p>Notes from discussion</p>
The school involves particular staff in the task of 'reaching out' to students with high mental health support needs					
Staff who relate easily to students are encouraged and supported to take on student support roles					
Professional roles within multi disciplinary teams are clarified for staff in support roles					
Support staff are supported with professional development, supervision, mentoring and de-briefing arrangements					
Staff can be covered in a situation where a particular student needs one to one support from the teacher with whom there is a relationship					
Support roles are highly valued and time and resources are allocated to them					
Support staff are encouraged to advocate on behalf of, or with students					
Staff are expected to persist with students experiencing problems					
Curriculum is influenced by support staff who the students with support needs best					

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<p>Themes related to what helps students with support needs connect to school</p> <p>2. INFORMING STAFF AND STUDENTS</p>	<p>Do we already do this?</p> <p>Y/N</p>	<p>How effective is our practice?</p> <p>1_2_3_4_5</p> <p>high low</p>	<p>What else could we do?</p>	<p>Priority for further action</p> <p>1_2_3_4_5</p> <p>high low</p>	<p>Notes from discussion</p>
All staff have an understanding of mental health problems					
All staff share responsibility for the care of all students					
Referral pathways are known by all staff who 'walk the walk' with the student to the referral point					
Staff understand that withdrawn or acting out behaviour may be associated with mental health problems					
Discipline is managed in the context of understanding the student					
Students have an understanding of mental health problems					
Peers are trained to support other students					
Help seeking is encouraged from a range of known sources, ie school support staff, student supporters, posters, websites, community agencies, general practitioners					

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<p>Themes related to what helps students with support needs connect to school</p> <p>3. FAIR TREATMENT</p>	<p>Do we already do this?</p> <p>Y/N</p>	<p>How effective is our practice?</p> <p>1_2_3_4_5</p> <p>high low</p>	<p>What else could we do?</p>	<p>Priority for further action</p> <p>1_2_3_4_5</p> <p>high low</p>	<p>Notes from discussion</p>
The school has specific policies and statements indicating that bullying, harassment and discrimination are not tolerated					
All staff understand and act on the policies when infringements occur					
The school monitors staff implementation of these policies					
Personal safety is protected for all school community members					
Assessment practices are inclusive of different learning styles					
Pastoral care makes sure everyone is known and that advocacy assistance can be offered to students when needed					
Discipline procedures are fair and provide opportunities for students to 'make good'					
Diversity is affirmed in the selection of students and staff for different roles and opportunities					
There is a valuing of relationship building, including through a range of informal activities					
There are caring, mutually respectful relationships across the school					

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<p>Themes related to what helps students with support needs connect to school</p> <p>4. LISTENING WELL</p>	<p>Do we already do this?</p> <p>Y/N</p>	<p>How effective is our practice?</p> <p>1_2_3_4_5</p> <p>high low</p>	<p>What else could we do?</p>	<p>Priority for further action</p> <p>1_2_3_4_5</p> <p>high low</p>	<p>Notes from discussion</p>
Know which students need support					
Seek the opinions of students of different ages and groups about issues that affect them most such as school rules and homework/assessment tasks and how support is offered					
Give priority to building, protecting and maintaining students friendship networks					
Encourage students to build strong relationships					
Understand the importance of teaching and learning to all students – not just the most academic					
Manage the potential for stigma in relation to mental health problems so that it is minimised					
Involve students strongly in decision making including in case management					
Make sure that at least one staff member knows what's going on for each student					
Have clean school facilities including toilets					
Give students the opportunity to choose their staff mentors and advisors					
Support students to support other students					
Check whether staff expectations about rules and requirements are realistic					
Give students opportunities to learn with their friends					
Consult and share decision making about their learning and the nature and timing of support with students					