



## Beyond Blue submission to the Senate Inquiry into the National Trend of School Refusal

8 December 2022

### Beyond Blue recommends:

1. The Commonwealth Government continues investment in Be You: the national mental health in education initiative beyond June 2023, at an adequate level, to enable Be You to continue to support educators and meet demand for schools responding to school refusal and related wellbeing issues.
2. The Commonwealth and State and Territory governments coordinate resourcing to ensure equal access across the country for teachers and school leaders to have sufficient paid time to:
  - Participate in professional learning focused on mental health and wellbeing
  - Implement evidence-based whole-school wellbeing initiatives such as Be You

### Introduction

- Beyond Blue welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Senate Inquiry into the National Trend of School Refusal. This submission draws on Beyond Blue's experience in designing, delivering and evaluating Be You, the Commonwealth's national mental health in education initiative [www.beyou.edu.au](http://www.beyou.edu.au). We make this submission on behalf of Beyond Blue and our Be You delivery partners, Early Childhood Australia and headspace, who we have consulted with to inform this submission. This has included capturing insights from Be You consultants who work directly with teachers and school leaders across the country.
- Education is a critical setting where children and young people's mental health and wellbeing can be supported. Schools and educators need to be adequately supported to respond to increasingly complex demands. Mental health challenges in children and young people have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and recent natural disasters.<sup>1</sup>
- Be You launched in November 2018, bringing together several previously separately funded Commonwealth programs. In only four years Be You has far surpassed the reach of predecessor programs with **70% (7,252) of all Australian schools** and **33% (5,788) of early learning services** registered as Be You learning communities. In addition, over 160,000 educators and people studying education have signed up to Be You.
- Be You is helping schools and teachers address school refusal by providing:
  - A framework and tailored consultant support to help schools implement a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

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<sup>1</sup> Biddle N, Gray M, Rehill P. (2022). Mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 period in Australia. ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods; Sicouri, G., March, S., Pellicano, L., De Young, A., Donovan, C., Cobham, V., Hudson, J. (2021, June 10). Mental Health Symptoms in Children and Adolescents during COVID-19 in Australia, *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*; De Young, A., Paterson, R., March, S., Hoehn, E., Alisic, Cobham, V., Donovan, C., Middeldorp, C., Gash, T., and Vasileva, M. (2021). COVID-19 Unmasked Young Children Report 2: Impact of the second wave in Australia on the mental health of young children and parents. Brisbane. Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health, Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service.

- Accredited professional learning for teachers, school leaders and tertiary education students
- Tools and resources to equip teachers to:
  - identify students who may be at risk of school refusal
  - intervene early to encourage students at risk to keep attending
  - respond to students who are struggling to attend school or have disengaged
  - engage with students' families to help address school refusal.

**Recommendation 1: The Commonwealth Government continues investment in Be You: the national mental health in education initiative beyond June 2023, at an adequate level, to enable Be You to continue to support educators and meet demand for schools responding to school refusal and related wellbeing issues**

### Rationale

**This section of our submission addresses the Inquiry's Terms of Reference:**

**a.) The increasing number, since the COVID-19 pandemic, of young people and their families who are experiencing school refusal**

- The increase in school refusal due to the COVID-19 pandemic that has been reported across the community, media and the education sector reflects insights from Be You consultants. Be You consultants report school refusal remains a challenge for children and young people in schools, as well as for teachers, school leaders and families across the country.
- Be You consultants and teachers point out that, while school refusal and disengagement may have been worsened by the pandemic, this challenge has been present for many years.
- The extent of the increase in school refusal due to the COVID-19 pandemic is hard to determine as there is no national, standardised dataset that reports on school refusal.
- We do have data indicating a decline in the mental health of children and young people.<sup>2</sup> However, it is unknown how this relates to school refusal. The reasons for the decline are long term, multiple and complex, but research indicates that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed.<sup>3</sup>
- The impacts of the pandemic have not been evenly distributed throughout the community. Children, young people and families who have had greater negative impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic include those who:  
Experienced more frequent and restrictive lockdowns
  - Had pre-existing mental health challenges
  - Were socially isolated and/or lonely
  - Experience socioeconomic adversity
  - Had a disability, chronic health or neurodevelopmental condition.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing; Brennan, N., Beames, J. R, Kos, A., Reily, N., Connell, C., Hall, S., Yip, D., Hudson, J., O'Dea, B., Di Nicola, K., and Christie, R. (2021). Psychological Distress in Young People in Australia Fifth Biennial Youth Mental Health Report: 2012-2020. Mission Australia: Sydney NSW.

<sup>3</sup> Biddle N. Gray M. Rehill P. (2022). Mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 period in Australia. ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods; Tiller, E., Greenland, N., Christie, R., Kos, A., Brennan, N., & Di Nicola, K. (2021). Youth Survey Report 2021. Sydney, NSW: Mission Australia; Australian Human Rights Commission. (2022). 'Mental health shapes my life': COVID-19 & kids' wellbeing.

<sup>4</sup> Sicouri, G., March, S., Pellicano, L., De Young, A., Donovan, C., Cobham, V., Hudson, J. (2021, June 10). Mental Health Symptoms in Children and Adolescents during COVID-19 in Australia. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*; De Young, A., Paterson, R., March, S., Hoehn, E., Alisic., Cobham, V., Donovan, C., Middeldorp, C., Gash, T., and

- Regular school attendance was in decline prior to the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> We know that school refusal and disengagement prior to the pandemic disproportionately impacted students who experienced a range of personal, social and community risk factors.<sup>6</sup>
- It is likely that any increase in school refusal since the COVID-19 pandemic is disproportionately affecting those students and families who were already experiencing disadvantage.

#### How can Be You help address school refusal and these longer-term trends?

- Be You supports early learning services and schools to develop positive, inclusive and resilient learning communities where every child, young person, educator and family can achieve their best possible mental health. The initiative:
  - equips teachers to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people from birth to 18 years, providing an end-to-end approach for early learning services, primary schools, and secondary schools across Australia;
  - promotes mental health literacy and wellbeing, and works to prevent mental health issues and suicide through early intervention and critical incident response and support;
  - equips educators with the knowledge and skills to support students' mental health and embed social and emotional learning into their pedagogy; and
  - supports educators' wellbeing.
- In line with global best practice, Be You promotes a long-term, whole learning community approach through planning and implementation tools and expert Be You Consultant support.<sup>7</sup>
- For students who are struggling to attend school or those who might be at risk of doing so, building an inclusive, welcoming school community through a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing is critical to keeping them engaged with their education and school community.
- Be You has developed resources specifically focused on supporting teachers and schools to intervene early and respond to the issue of school refusal. These include:
  - A webinar titled "Understanding School Refusal" that was delivered in November 2021.<sup>8</sup> This webinar recorded a large audience with 2,941 registrations and an attendance of 1,381 (a 47% conversion rate), and the webinar has had 597 views post-session.
  - Be You fact sheets on School Refusal and Promoting School Attendance.<sup>9</sup> These fact sheets are two of our most commonly accessed (with 19,391 and 5,496 pageviews respectively). Teachers were engaging with these fact sheets before the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting that these are long term issues. However, interest in these topics has spiked at various points following the return to on-site learning in early 2021.

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Vasileva, M. (2021). COVID-19 Unmasked Young Children Report 2: Impact of the second wave in Australia on the mental health of young children and parents. Brisbane. Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health, Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service.

<sup>5</sup> Productivity Commission. (2022). *Review of the National School Reform Agreement*, Interim Report, Canberra, September, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Watterston, J. & O'Connell, M. (2019). *Those Who Disappear: The Australian education problem nobody wants to talk about*. Melbourne Graduate School of Education.

<sup>7</sup> Patel V et al. (2018). The *Lancet* Commission on Global Mental Health and Sustainable Development. Volume 392. Issue 10157. Giles-Kaye A et al. (2022). Supporting children's mental health in primary schools: A qualitative exploration of educator perspectives. *The Australian Educational Researcher*.

<sup>8</sup> [https://beyou.edu.au/resources/sessions-and-events/understanding-school-refusal;](https://beyou.edu.au/resources/sessions-and-events/understanding-school-refusal)

<sup>9</sup> [https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/development/school-refusal;](https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/development/school-refusal) [https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/development/promoting-school-attendance.](https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/development/promoting-school-attendance)

- Information on school refusal on the Be You website directs teachers and school leaders to professional development modules that will help equip them to support students who are struggling to attend.<sup>10</sup>
- Be You fills a critical role. Schools and early learning services currently have limited access to tailored guidance to implement an integrated whole-of-setting approach to mental health. However, funding for the initiative is only confirmed until 30 June 2023, creating major service and workforce continuity challenges. As an evidence-based mental health prevention and promotion initiative, Be You works to address the mental health and wellbeing needs of students before they escalate and require more specialist and costly clinical interventions.
- Beyond Blue has submitted proposals to the Commonwealth to seek urgent confirmation of ongoing funding, at a level that recognises the cumulative impacts of above-target Be You registrations, indexation, Government-legislated compulsory superannuation increases and rising supplier costs. This will enable Beyond Blue and headspace to:
  - Increase the consultant workforce to provide more tailored support to schools to assist them to implement a whole-school approach to wellbeing as a critical way of addressing school refusal;
  - Develop new resources focused on the issue of school refusal as well as related topics that schools can use to scaffold around their response; and
  - Further support teachers' and school leaders' wellbeing.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://beyou.edu.au/resources/sessions-and-events/understanding-school-refusal>

## The case to continue and strengthen Be You

Be You launched in November 2018, bringing together - in a single end-to-end initiative - several previously separately funded Commonwealth programs, including KidsMatter and MindMatters.

Since its inception Be You has achieved:

### Reach

- 7,252 schools are registered, which is 70% of all ACARA schools and 4 times the number of schools reached by its predecessor programs KidsMatters Primary and MindMatters.
- 5,788 early learning services are registered, which is 33% of all ACECQA services and more than 10 times the number of services reached by predecessor program KidsMatters Early Childhood.

### Impact

- Independent evaluation and research have found:
  - Be You schools have seen greater increases in academic outcomes (NAPLAN scores).<sup>11</sup>
  - Students in engaged Be You secondary schools were significantly more likely to have improved social and emotional wellbeing scores.<sup>12</sup>
  - Be You educators report being more confident than non-users at supporting children and young people's mental health.<sup>13</sup>
  - Engagement with Be You had a positive effect on community resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic and bushfires.<sup>14</sup>
  - The more engaged a learning community is with Be You, the greater the impact of academic, health and community resilience outcomes for that learning community.<sup>15</sup>
  - The Be You consultant implementation support is one of the most critical enablers of the success of the model.<sup>16</sup>

### Value

- Be You is an effective, efficient and evidence-based initiative that is driving real value in a highly efficient and scalable way.
- Analysis indicates there was an average cost of \$7,900 per learning community (calculated per annum) under KidsMatter and MindMatters.
- Be You has reduced this current average cost to less than \$1,969 per registered learning community (based on October 2022 figures and the total expenditure for the previous 12 months), delivering a productivity improvement of 75%.

11. Dix KL et al. (2022). Be You Evaluation Final Report: from launch until mid-2021. Report for Beyond Blue. Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne.
12. Dix KL et al. (2022). Be You Evaluation Final Report: from launch until mid-2021. Report for Beyond Blue. Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne
13. Quantum Market Research. (2022). *Be You National Mental Health in Education: Research Report*. Melbourne: Quantum Market Research.
14. Dix KL et al. (2022). Be You Evaluation Final Report: from launch until mid-2021. Report for Beyond Blue. Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne
15. Dix KL et al. (2022). Be You Evaluation Final Report: from launch until mid-2021. Report for Beyond Blue. Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne
16. Smith SS et al. (2021). Final Report for the Overarching Evaluation of the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program. Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR), The University of Queensland.



**Recommendation 2: The Commonwealth and State and Territory governments coordinate resourcing to ensure equal access across the country for teachers and school leaders to have sufficient paid time to:**

- Participate in professional learning focused on mental health and wellbeing
- Implement evidence-based whole-school wellbeing initiatives such as Be You

**Rationale**

**This section of our submission addresses the Inquiry's Terms of Reference:**

**c.) The impacts and demands of the increasing case load on service providers and schools to support these students and their families;**

- Be You consultants work with school leaders throughout 2022 indicates that school refusal is having a significant impact on workload and the ability to meet students' needs. School refusal is one of the more complex matters to manage because the reasons or triggers associated with school refusal are so vast and often difficult to identify and address.
- The increase in school refusal compounds existing pressures on time. Teachers' and school leaders' workloads are already high and are increasing.<sup>17</sup>
- Teachers want to be able to support the mental health and wellbeing of their students and understand that this is a core part of their role.<sup>18</sup> However, they lack the confidence and time to effectively support their students.<sup>19</sup>
- Despite increased focus on the importance of education settings in the promotion of wellbeing and intervening to improve mental health, evidence indicates that not enough is being done to adequately equip teachers to be able to support the mental health and wellbeing needs of their students.<sup>20</sup>
- School leaders and teachers need ongoing professional development to build and strengthen their skills and confidence in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students. Ensuring all teachers are supported to develop these skills through regular professional development, from when they graduate and throughout their career, is crucial to implementing whole-school wellbeing initiatives, including Be You.
- Evidence from the implementation of Be You supports this approach to building teachers' and school leaders' confidence and skills to support the wellbeing of students and teachers in their schools. Beyond Blue's national survey of Mental Health in Education found that:
  - Educators participating in Be You felt more empowered to contribute to the wellbeing of their school or early learning community compared to non-users (60% vs 47%).<sup>21</sup>
  - Leaders in Be You communities were also more likely to actively support the mental health and wellbeing of educators (67% vs 55%).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2021). *Australian Teacher Workforce Data: National Teacher Workforce Characteristics Report*, Melbourne.

<sup>18</sup> Quantum Market Research. (2022). *Be You National Mental Health in Education: Research Report*. Melbourne: Quantum Market Research

<sup>19</sup> Quantum Market Research. (2022). *Be You National Mental Health in Education: Research Report*. Melbourne: Quantum Market Research

<sup>20</sup> Anderson, M., Werner-Seidler, A., King, C., Gayed, A., Harvey, S. B., & O'Dea, B. (2019). Mental health training programs for secondary school teachers: A systematic review. *School Mental Health*, 11(3), 489–508.

<sup>21</sup> Quantum Market Research. (2022). *Be You National Mental Health in Education: Research Report*. Melbourne: Quantum Market Research

<sup>22</sup> Quantum Market Research. (2022). *Be You National Mental Health in Education: Research Report*. Melbourne: Quantum Market Research

- Be You educators report being more confident than non-users at supporting children and young people's mental health (77% vs 64%)<sup>23</sup>
- Paid time needs to be available to ensure that teachers and school leaders can participate in professional development focused on mental health and wellbeing. They also need time to be able to implement what they learn in the classroom and across their school community.
- Some jurisdictions have implemented some or part of Beyond Blue's recommendation to provide more support to implement Be You and mental health and wellbeing support. An example of this is in Victoria, the Victorian Schools Mental Health Fund rollout has commenced and Be You has been listed on the Schools Mental Health menu as a tier 1 program.<sup>24</sup> However, Beyond Blue argues that *all* schools across Australia should have equal access to support the implementation of mental health and wellbeing initiatives.
- Achieving this goal would be supported by leveraging the Federal Government's budget commitment to the Student Wellbeing Boost (\$203.7 million). Coordinating these initiatives will help to maximise available resourcing and promote equal access across Australia to ensure schools, teachers and school leadership are supported to implement Be You and mental health and wellbeing supports.<sup>25</sup>
- Implementing this recommendation in alignment with actions developed as part of the final National Teacher Workforce Action Plan would maximise the value from this recommendation.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Quantum Market Research. (2022). *Be You National Mental Health in Education: Research Report*. Melbourne: Quantum Market Research

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/classrooms/Pages/resources-schools-Mental-Health-Fund-and-Menu-to-support-students.aspx>

<sup>25</sup> Australian Labor Party, "Labor's Plan to Help Our Schoolkids Bounce Back": <https://www.alp.org.au/policies/help-schoolkids-bounce-back>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.education.gov.au/teaching-and-school-leadership/resources/draft-national-teacher-workforce-action-plan#:~:text=The%20Draft%20National%20Teacher%20Workforce,Improving%20teacher%20supply>