

Submission to the Inquiry by the Senate Select Committee on Mental Health

Prepared and presented by the Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council (APAPDC)

Background

The **Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council Inc** (APAPDC) was formed in 1993 by the four national peak professional associations of school principals¹. Its mission is to provide relevant, timely and effective professional development for principals and other school leaders on matters of national importance in schooling. Its work is undertaken across those boundaries that often divide educators – sectoral, geographic and age of students. The APAPDC is governed by a Council made up of representatives of the four peak bodies – current Chair is Mr Ted Brierley of Victoria. The APAPDC Secretariat is located in Adelaide, with some officers located out-posted in the states and territories.

The **MindMatters** project was established by the APAPDC for the period 2000-2005 with funding provided by the Australian Government through the Department of Health and Ageing. As such, it represents a small but important component of the commitment to the National Mental Health Strategy by the Australian Government and the leaders of the nation's schools. MindMatters is fundamentally a mental health promotion project that works directly with principals, staff, students and school communities in secondary schools. It has been a major initiative for the APAPDC and has a proven track record².

Key points relevant to the Terms of Reference

Note: No attempt has been made to link this information directly to individual Terms of Reference. The material is particularly relevant to Terms of Reference a, f, h, l, n and o, although readers may see the points made as relevant to others.

The core achievements of MindMatters are:

- A suite of highly accessible and useful professional materials.

¹ Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA), Australian Secondary Principals Association (ASPA), Association of Principals of Catholic Secondary Schools of Australia (APCSSA) and Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA).

² Details of the Evaluation of the MindMatters project can be provided if required.

- A record of high-impact training of leaders and staff in some 2200 schools in all states and territories.³
- Some highly valued 'spin-off' projects such as FamiliesMatter, StaffMatters and PrimaryMatters.
- Special attention in the framework of activities to the needs of Indigenous communities and the schools in those communities.
- Timely and relevant evaluation and research data that can support policy and program development now and into the future.

The project has been strongly based on the principles of mental health promotion and has provided information and training that assist teachers in their day-to-day work. It is a unique and highly effective partnership between the education and health sectors, and school leaders as key motivators and supporters of change in schools. The day-to-day conduct of the project's many activities has been undertaken by national and state-based officers. Their enthusiasm, commitment and plain hard work have been keys to the success of the project.

The achievements of the MindMatters project include but go well beyond 'de-stigmatising mental illness and disorders' to providing teachers and schools as the 'front-line professionals' with knowledge, strategies and skills that enable them to

- encourage their students to make positive, mentally healthy life choices.
- enhance the resilience of all students.
- achieve more positive outcomes for students suffering mental illness and/or disorders.
- engage whole school communities by increasing their awareness of the issues around mental health promotion and their capacity to take positive and appropriate action.

The 'spin-off' projects have and continue to contribute to particular aspects of these, but always as part of a coherent, unified approach under the MindMatters banner. This coherence is almost 'badging' – it has proved important in encouraging schools and others to look favourably at new initiatives directed at particular groups. Put simply, they are aware of MindMatters as a proven success and consequently trust that new initiatives will have similar qualities.

The integration of health and education means that all relevant professionals across the sectors can move towards using a common and unambiguous language to discuss issue of mental health.

³ This represents approximately 79% of all secondary schools.

All the above relates mainly to the 'information and training' emphasis in MindMatters programs. There has been strong commitment to independent evaluation throughout the duration of the project, as well as some targeted research initiatives. Hence the APAPDC has learnt a great deal about what works for schools in terms of mental health promotion. Sharing this information is an important task for the APAPDC now and into the future. The signal success of the MindMatters *Going well* national conference and pre-conference workshops (Sydney, March 2005) indicates that there is a thirst in the education and health communities for this information. The APAPDC is clearly well suited to the task of disseminating its findings from MindMatters, given that its core business is professional development.

Conclusion

The above could be seen as a promotion of the MindMatters project. To some extent, that is as it should be – the APAPDC is extremely proud of what the project has been able to achieve for students, teachers and schools. This is especially noteworthy given the relatively short timeframe and the lack of any coherent base on which to build – MindMatters has been a trail-blazer in many respects. However, the independent evaluation of MindMatters clearly indicates that this is a case of well-founded self-promotion.

The APAPDC sees the 2000-2005 MindMatters project as a significant beginning on the task of promoting mental health and well-being for all our young people. There are clearly many schools, teachers and students that have yet to have direct contact with MindMatters and that benefits that can flow. The learning from the initial project also indicates that there are newly identified needs and directions. Important among these de-stigmatising mental health issues in the early childhood and primary years and refining, targeting and rolling out community-based approaches that build on what has been learnt to date.

The APAPDC has commenced discussions with officers of the Department of Health and Ageing with a view to making these three areas (further roll-out of MindMatters training, approaches for the primary years and targeted community-based initiatives) the core activities for further funding. The outcomes of the current review will also help shape any future activities, but the APAPDC argues strongly that the great work of MindMatters needs to be built on in the future, whatever the form and substance of the overall strategies that are eventually established.

Through the APPDC MindMatters project the school leaders of Australia have played their part in the National Mental Health Strategy, and look forward to involvement in further high-impact work in this area.

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27 April 2005