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REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL  
SCHOOL REFORM AGREEMENT

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ORYGEN SUBMISSION

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# REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL SCHOOL REFORM AGREEMENT

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## ORYGEN SUBMISSION

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Orygen welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission's review of the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA). Orygen's submission is limited to identifying opportunities to strengthen the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

### ABOUT ORYGEN

Orygen is the world's leading research and knowledge translation organisation focusing on mental ill-health in young people. At Orygen, our leadership and staff work to deliver cutting-edge research, policy development, innovative clinical services, and evidence-based training and education to ensure that there is continuous improvement in the treatments and care provided to young people experiencing mental ill-health.

Orygen conducts clinical research, runs clinical services (five headspace centres), supports the professional development of the youth mental health workforce and provides policy advice relating to young people's mental health. Our current research strengths include: early psychosis, mood disorders, personality disorders, functional recovery, suicide prevention, online interventions, neurobiology and health economics.

## 1. DRIVERS OF STUDENT OUTCOMES

### A. WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SUGGEST ARE THE KEY DRIVERS OF STUDENT OUTCOMES ACROSS THE THREE KEY NSRA DOMAINS — ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT, ENGAGEMENT, AND SKILL ACQUISITION? AND B. ARE THERE BARRIERS THAT DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACT OUTCOMES FOR SPECIFIC COHORTS OF STUDENTS?

Students experiencing mental ill-health comprise a significant proportion of the student population. The most recent Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, conducted almost ten years ago, found that one in seven (13.9 per cent) Australians between 4-17 years old experience mental ill-health over a 12 month period.<sup>(1)</sup> The same survey found that one in ten (10.9 per cent) Australian 12-17 year olds report having ever self-harmed.<sup>(1)</sup> In 2018, the Murdoch Children's Research Institute identified that one in ten (9.7 per cent) Victorian students between Year 3 and 7 report persistently low wellbeing and one in five (21.9 per cent) report persistent emotional problems.<sup>(2)</sup>

Experiences of mental ill-health can impact young people across the three key NSRA domains of academic achievement, engagement and skill acquisition. Enabling all students to fully participate in schooling will require prevention activities to minimise the potential risk and impact mental ill-health can have on education outcomes, and early intervention initiatives to provide targeted support when needed.

#### ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Experiences of mental ill-health have a considerable impact on learning and academic performance, comparable to the impact of experiencing difficult socioeconomic circumstances.<sup>(2)</sup> The impact of

mental ill-health on education and academic achievement influences the vocational trajectory of young people across their school years and throughout their lives. Between Years 3 and 7, Australian students with persistent emotional and behaviour problems fall a year behind their peers in numeracy, and their reading ability is also negatively impacted.(2) Students with persistently low wellbeing in mid-primary school fall eight months behind in numeracy. A study of Year 3 students in Victoria found that the academic performance of boys with emotional or behavioural problems were 12 months behind their peers, and that students with emotional or behavioural issues are at high-risk of academic difficulty.(3)

## **ENGAGEMENT**

The NSRA is focused on all students being engaged in their schooling. In annual an annual survey of Australian students, persistent low wellbeing across Years 3 to 5 have a 2.1 fold increase in the odds of disengagement in the first year of secondary school.(2) Conversely, a single occurrence of high wellbeing measured in Year 3, 4 or 5 was associated with a two-fold decrease in the odds of student disengagement in Year 7.

## **SKILL ACQUISITION**

The NSRA has a focus on the skills needed to transition to further study, work or life success. The Productivity Commission's inquiry into mental health recognised that transitions from secondary school into further study and/or work can place additional stress on young people.(4) Students experiencing mental ill-health are particularly at risk of not adapting to post-secondary education. An Australian study of first-year university students suggested that students with lower levels of depression and anxiety are more likely to adapt.(5) Some students may also require focused support when transitioning to work, with young people feeling unprepared during the transition from education to employment.(6) Consultations with young people identified that this can be a source of stress.

## **SCHOOL TRANSITIONS**

School transitions require dedicated supports to address its impact on student education and wellbeing outcomes. An Australian study of over 1,500 students identified that 31 per cent experience a difficult or somewhat difficult transition to secondary education, which was associated with increased levels of depression and anxiety after Year 7.(7) In New South Wales, the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation found that the transition from primary to secondary school was associated with a decline in learning effort, valuing of school outcomes and sense of school belonging.(8) Mental health and wellbeing support during the transition between primary and secondary school require a dedicated focus to ensure positive academic outcomes and engagement.

## **C. WHICH OF THESE DRIVERS OR BARRIERS CAN GOVERNMENTS CHANGE OR INFLUENCE?**

Through government funding and guidance, schools can be supported to implement evidence-based and effective wellbeing supports. A systematic review and meta-analysis of student wellbeing interventions in schools and academic achievement found that wellbeing interventions provided increased general academic achievement to the equivalent of three months of additional learning, increased literacy achievement to the equivalent of an additional month of learning, and increased numeracy achievement to the equivalent of an additional two months of learning.(9) Additionally, wellbeing interventions in schools had small to moderate effects on social-emotional adjustment, behavioural adjustment, cognitive adjustment and internalising symptoms.

## 2. ASSESSING THE APPROPRIATENESS OF THE NATIONAL POLICY INITIATIVES

### H. WHAT POLICY INITIATIVES (OR ACTIONS) WOULD BE APPROPRIATE TO INCLUDE IN THE NEXT NATIONAL SCHOOL REFORM AGREEMENT? WHY?

Many schools recognise that they have an important role to play in supporting student wellbeing, with the Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing identifying that 40.2 per cent of Australian students with mental ill-health receive services and supports through school.<sup>(1)</sup> One-fifth (22.6 per cent) of Australian students using health services were referred by their school, and school staff members suggested emotional and behavioural support for two in five (40.5 per cent) cases of students with mental ill-health. Given the increase in mental health awareness, training and programs in schools over the past decade, these figures may now be higher.

Schools have always been pivotal in identifying mental ill-health and providing or connecting young people to services, recognising their responsibility to student wellbeing and the impact that mental ill-health has on learning. However, many students with preventable or existing mental ill-health are currently unidentified and unsupported. Schools require a national policy focus to consistently and appropriately support students across Australia, which can be delivered by including student mental health and wellbeing in the NSRA. Strong referral pathways between schools and youth mental health services are needed to ensure that all students receive appropriate support when they need it.

A number of national recommendations have previously been made to enhance student mental health and wellbeing. Orygen supports the Productivity Commission's inquiry into mental health recommendation to develop guidelines for teacher education and professional development in social and emotional development and mental health.<sup>(4)</sup> Orygen also supports the recommendation to develop national guidelines for accrediting social and emotional school programs. These guidelines should place an additional focus on times of high-risk, including support for educational transitions.

In Victoria, the Royal Commission into Victoria's mental health system recommended that the Victorian Government fund evidence-based mental health initiatives in schools, as well as a validated list of student wellbeing programs. This approach should be evaluated and considered as a National Policy Initiative in the NSRA.

Supporting youth mental health is a priority of all governments, with clear evidence-based links to student outcomes. While a number of national recommendations for initiatives have previously been made by the Productivity Commission, states and territories are currently focused on student mental health independently, potentially duplicating work and limiting the ability to leverage knowledge and expertise. A National Policy Initiative focused on student mental health and wellbeing should sit within the current reform direction of "supporting students, student learning and student achievement".

**Recommendation 1:** The NSRA should include student wellbeing and mental health prevention and early intervention as a National Policy Initiative. This should consider social and emotional wellbeing programs and teacher training, and include a focus on educational transitions and building strong referral pathways to mental health care.

### 3. MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK AND PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

#### A. DOES THE PERFORMANCE REPORTING FRAMEWORK IN THE NATIONAL SCHOOL REFORM AGREEMENT (NSRA) EMBODY THE 'RIGHT' MIX OF OBJECTIVES, OUTCOMES, TARGETS AND SUB-OUTCOMES FOR INCLUSION IN A FUTURE AGREEMENT?

Orygen supports Action 5.3 of the Productivity Commission's inquiry into mental health, which recommends including student wellbeing as an outcome in the NSRA, including clear and measurable wellbeing targets.<sup>(4)</sup> This recommendation should be included in a future agreement.

**Recommendation 2:** Expand the NSRA to include student wellbeing as an outcome with measurable targets.

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