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CommunityMatters: Working with Diversity for Wellbeing

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Tel: (03) 9207 9600

Fax: (03) 9639 1616

Email: sales@curriculum.edu.au

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Foreword

I would like to welcome you to *CommunityMatters* – one of the three overarching books of the *MindMatters* resource materials. *CommunityMatters* provides a social and cultural context to mental health issues for school communities. Written for school leadership teams, it transforms sound research into exciting and challenging educational practice.

CommunityMatters argues that schools are places where all students have the right to feel welcome and safe, regardless of who they are or from where they come. School communities should be clear that what they do and how they do it will make a difference in each student's journey of development.

CommunityMatters shifts the focus from 'mental health' to a holistic 'social and emotional wellbeing', in which mental health is not just an individual concern, but inextricably linked with community, culture and identity. To this end, all members of the school community have a responsibility to establish partnerships based on mutual recognition and respect in order to promote the wellbeing of all students.

These materials have been developed after considerable consultation with a broad cross-section of our contemporary Australian community and represent the best of theory and practice as we understand it in 2001. I recommend *CommunityMatters* to you.



Don Zoellner
Chairperson
Australian Principals Associations Professional Development
Council Incorporated (APAPDC)

Acknowledgements

Project Manager

Jeremy Hurley

Writers

Jeremy Hurley and *She'll Be Write* (Karen Jennings and Joan Cunningham)

Advisers

Jo Mason (National Coordinator, *MindMatters*), Marianne Watson (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Officer, *MindMatters*)

The development of *CommunityMatters* was subject to an extensive consultation process, and the contributions of many expert people are acknowledged.

The process included:

- obtaining advice and direction from many individuals who are specialists in the areas that are covered in the resource;
- inviting feedback on the drafts from more than 200 people and groups representing in particular a range of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and transcultural interests, both from the education and health sectors;
- consultation with the *MindMatters* State Working Parties, National Reference Group, National Evaluation Committee and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee.

Contents

Foreword	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
The <i>MindMatters</i> materials	vi
Overview	1
The <i>MindMatters</i> program	1
What is <i>CommunityMatters</i> ?	2
<i>CommunityMatters</i> toolkit	4
1 The <i>CommunityMatters</i> approach	5
2 Community, culture and identity	11
Community	12
Culture	15
Identity	16
Community, culture and identity in Australia	18
The <i>CommunityMatters</i> Partnership Process	20
Staff activities for professional development	27
3 Diversity and wellbeing	33
Exploring issues of diversity	34
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues	35
Rural and remote issues	46
Disability issues	50
Same-sex attraction issues	55
Non-English-speaking background issues	60
Action inventory	67
4 The wellbeing of all students	69
Building protective factors	70
Teaching and learning	77
5 Working together – community does matter	81
Involving parents, families and community members	84
Involving our students	86
Involving our community and specialist support services	87
The community forum	88
Appendix 1: The whole student approach	91
Appendix 2: The Comprehensive School Mental Health Program	92
Appendix 3: The whole school approach	93
Appendix 4: The <i>CommunityMatters</i> Partnership Framework	94
Appendix 5: Embedding <i>MindMatters</i> in the curriculum	95
Appendix 6: Normalising diversity	97
Appendix 7: The Protective Factors Process	99
Appendix 8: Action inventory	100
Definitions and terminology	105
Bibliography	109

The *MindMatters* materials

MindMatters consists of a range of text and multimedia components.

There are three overarching texts:

SchoolMatters: Mapping and Managing Mental Health in Schools

Planning tools and a framework to assist schools with possible structures, strategies, partnerships and curriculum programs to promote and protect the mental health of all members of the school community

CommunityMatters: Working with Diversity for Wellbeing

Explores identity, culture and community and suggests strategies for managing the wellbeing needs of diverse groups of students, particularly those who may feel marginalised for social reasons, within the contexts of school and broader communities

Educating for Life: A Guide for School-Based Responses to Preventing Self-Harm and Suicide

Policies, processes and practices that contribute to a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention

The following texts deal with specific issues:

Enhancing Resilience 1: Communication, Changes and Challenges

Designed to enhance resilience via the promotion of communication, participation, positive self-regard, teamwork and a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school

Enhancing Resilience 2: Stress and Coping

Targeted at middle to upper secondary students and deals with the importance of providing ongoing opportunities for participation and communication, creating a positive school culture, friendly relationships, and a sense of valuing school and community

A Whole School Approach to Dealing with Bullying and Harassment

Includes a comprehensive checklist to guide policy and practice, as well as curriculum units targeted at lower secondary school students

Understanding Mental Illness

An overview of the issues a school may face in relation to mental illness among students, staff and families; includes a curriculum unit and video aimed at middle to senior secondary students

Loss and Grief

An overview of school practices relevant to dealing with death and loss within the school, including a sequence of lessons for secondary students

MindMatters website: <http://www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters>

Background information, a diary of events, case studies, a chat line, an annotated bibliography, PDF copies of the above materials, an online version of *CommunityMatters*, and links to other sites

Overview

The *MindMatters* program

The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century (MCEETYA 1999) emphasises that schooling must provide a supportive and nurturing environment for the intellectual, physical, social, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development of young Australians. It states that there is a strong link between students' sense of self-worth, their social and emotional wellbeing, their enthusiasm for learning and their optimism for the future.

MindMatters is a resource and professional development program to support Australian secondary schools in promoting and protecting the social and emotional wellbeing of members of school communities. The *MindMatters* resource consists of a range of text and multimedia components, the three overarching texts being *SchoolMatters*, *CommunityMatters* and *Educating for Life*.

MindMatters was initially released in 2000. Follow-up consultations showed that there were a number of issues that needed to be addressed in greater detail within the overall *MindMatters* program. These issues include the following points.

- Students' sense of identity is one of the basic contributors to their mental health and is actively constructed over time within the context of community and culture. Ignoring or failing to adequately address any of these dimensions will have negative consequences for the social and emotional wellbeing of students.
- Any consideration of how schools can provide a supportive and nurturing environment for students must address the close relationship between 'community', 'culture' and 'identity'.
- Australian society is characterised by cultural and linguistic diversity and it is essential that schools value the full range of student diversity, as well as ensure that their students have the capacity to both contribute to and benefit from such diversity in the Australian community and internationally. Currently the needs of diverse marginalised groups are often not catered for.
- It is essential that the social and emotional wellbeing of students is supported by valuing their connectedness to 'community' outside the school, as well as by developing a sense of connectedness to the 'within school' community.

WWW

Education policies
and strategies

- The teaching, learning and ethos of the school will be enhanced by its connections and partnerships with the broader community outside the school. Current work by schools in developing partnerships with the broader community often ignores two critical dimensions: identifying who is 'community' and creating appropriate processes for establishing community partnerships.

What is *CommunityMatters*?

Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

World Health Organization
1948

CommunityMatters has been developed to address the above issues identified in *MindMatters* so that school leaders have a resource to use with their school staff and communities. This holistic approach to the promotion of mental health – of emotional and social wellbeing – explores the interrelationship between identity, culture and community, particularly:

- how fundamental resilience and wellbeing are to community and culture;
- the importance and development of partnerships so that, together with the community, its people and other resources, schools are places that promote social and emotional wellbeing for all students;
- a range of issues and strategies for fostering an environment and curriculum that increase protective factors, thus enhancing connectedness and resilience.

In educational terms, *CommunityMatters* aims to assist schools with the crucial task of transforming its following key statement into practice.

To enhance mental health protective factors and student social and emotional wellbeing, schools need to build a positive environment that will create caring relationships, a culture of high but achievable expectations and ongoing opportunities for authentic participation and contribution, for all students.

In addition, embedded in *CommunityMatters* are the principles of equity and social justice that are extensively enshrined in public policy in Australia, which schools play a key role in implementing.

CommunityMatters also addresses how schools, in partnerships, can use the holistic approach to mental health promotion in which:

- they are responsible for promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of all their students, not only those 'at risk' and including those who do not appear to 'fit in' easily, who are often ignored in strategic planning and service delivery;
- the wellbeing of each student is best promoted by a 'whole person' approach which results from the interrelationship between the quality of caring relationships, opportunities for authentic participation and contribution, and high but achievable expectations;

- the wellbeing of all students is best promoted by a ‘whole school approach’ where the school’s community partnerships, ethos and environment, and curriculum all intersect.

Within this whole school context, *CommunityMatters* identifies some of the key social and emotional wellbeing issues for five groups of students who are most likely to be marginalised and ignored in strategic planning and service delivery arrangements and are therefore more likely to be at risk in terms of their mental health.

CommunityMatters provides a range of strategies and activities for school leaders to use to build a positive environment that will create caring relationships, a culture of high but achievable expectations, and ongoing opportunities for authentic participation and contribution, for all students.

CommunityMatters identifies a range of ‘whole school’ issues as a starting point for school communities to explore and understand their own contexts. Finally, it provides a partnership model to help schools work strategically in both establishing partnerships and working within them, for the social and emotional wellbeing of all students.

CommunityMatters toolkit

While *CommunityMatters* is intended to be a standalone print resource, it has also been designed to integrate with the *MindMatters* website (<http://www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters>). This allows it to link with other resources and be more flexible. For these reasons, it is also available as a downloadable PDF file with customisable Word elements. This means, for example, that the audit and survey can be adapted for each school context.



Dealing with Bullying and Harassment has strategies and activities.

There are many times throughout *CommunityMatters* when this icon indicates that reference is being made to one of the other *MindMatters* books. In each case, the name of the booklet and where possible the particular section are included. In the PDF version, these icons are hotlinked to the other *MindMatters* books.

WWW

National agencies

This icon appears throughout *CommunityMatters* to indicate relevant Internet links. They can be found on the *CommunityMatters* page of the *MindMatters* website, and are hotlinked online.

ACTION

In the chapter called 'Diversity and wellbeing', this icon points to suggested actions that schools can take to promote student social and emotional wellbeing. All of these are collected in the 'Action inventory' that appears in Appendix 8.

CM

Diversity and wellbeing, p 33

This icon indicates other relevant material in *CommunityMatters* itself.