

MindMatters Plus Evaluation

What is MindMatters Plus?

MindMatters Plus was a national whole-school initiative that built on the universal approach of MindMatters. MindMatters Plus arose from teacher concern about how to provide for students at risk of mental health problems. MindMatters Plus sought to describe current school processes and strategies that support students, including (but not limited to) the identification of students requiring enhanced support, support mechanisms, teaching and learning strategies, referral pathways and methods of coordinated care. The range of health promotion and early intervention resources that are available were examined and fifteen programs with a strong evidence-base for their effectiveness were selected by the Australian Guidance Counsellors Association (AGCA) and offered to schools.

The primary aim of the project was to enhance the capacity of secondary schools to support students with high mental health needs. Students with high mental health needs refers to students at risk of developing a mental health problem, students showing early signs of developing problems or students with an existing mental health problem. MindMatters Plus was a demonstration project managed by the Australian Principals' Association Professional Development Council (APAPDC) and the AGCA.

Lessons Learnt and Outcomes Achieved

The MindMatters Plus project involved 17 demonstration schools across Australia. The schools represented the State, Catholic and Independent education systems and varied in size, location and socio-economic profile. Demonstration schools were selected on the basis of school type, their use of MindMatters as a universal approach and commitment to the initiative by school leadership and staff. The 17 participating demonstration schools were selected from 65 schools who applied to take part in the project.

The evaluation of MindMatters Plus includes consideration of the whole school system in each of the 17 demonstration schools. Universal health promoting programs and the whole school system affect both the students with high support needs and the capacity of the school to provide support to them. Students with high support needs are part of the whole school, so it was deemed as being invalid to try to isolate the aspects of the school support system that relate to high support needs students. The evaluation of MindMatters Plus focused on describing the systems that the 17 demonstration schools have in place to support mental health promotion.

The evaluation used an investigative approach to examine the combinations of programs and strategies that the schools adopted, including promotion, prevention and early intervention in combination with MindMatters. The evaluation was based on a program logic approach which was tested using a range of qualitative and quantitative data to determine schools' self-perception of their support systems for students. Schools' perceptions about the extent and manner of the influence of MindMatters Plus were also investigated. The evaluation utilised methods including a whole school

audit, a student survey and focus groups with teachers and students. The evaluation occurred in the last year of the three year demonstration project.

Key Findings

- All schools reported that the most important component of the MindMatters Plus initiative were the programs. All schools reported that the programs were a useful means of assisting students with high support needs in mental health;
- Schools reported that their involvement in the project helped engage their school executive in mental health issues;
- Many schools changed pastoral care lessons in order to implement programs and they trialled programs across whole year groups;
- Some students reported that they recognised that they needed to seek extra support;
- Teachers who ran the programs identified more high support needs students and referred them to welfare staff;
- Many of the schools reported an increase in the number of students who accessed welfare services after implementation of the project. Additionally, there was an improvement in student knowledge about external services;
- The professional development for staff was rated as exceptional, with staff reporting that they felt well supported;
- Schools reported that staff increased their solution focused thinking in addressing promotion, prevention and early intervention;
- Fifteen schools believed that they had well-established referral pathways and links to external agencies prior to implementing MindMatters Plus. Twelve schools reported that they maintained a detailed and up to date knowledge of other agencies' operational practices;
- One school felt that the professional development provided by MindMatters Plus had increased staff skills and enabled them to more effectively manage high support needs students issues within the school setting;
- Regarding referral to external services the main issues identified by schools were: lack of services in rural communities, limited access to bulk-billing and long waiting lists to access mental health services;
- Most of the schools found it difficult to identify specific measurable impacts of MindMatters Plus on students with high support needs. However, they reported seeing changes amongst many of the students who had participated in the MindMatters Plus programs. Student changes reported included:
 - increased self-esteem;
 - reduced bullying;

- greater awareness of the reasons why their fellow students misbehave or perform badly at school;
 - less ‘acting out’.
 - greater connectedness between students; and
 - greater support and understanding amongst students
- Being a MindMatters Plus school resulted in a more consistent approach amongst staff in managing student behaviour;
- Some schools did not effectively handle the issue of confidentiality and reported that information available to students about confidentiality was limited;
- Schools identified a weakness in the area of reintroducing students to the classroom after an absence related to a mental health issue. Seven schools said they had working practices and procedures for this, four schools said that practices and procedures were unclear and three said that they did not know of any practices and procedures in this area. Specific practices and procedures were not developed directly through the implementation of MindMatters Plus.