

Towards a Queensland Rural and Remote Mental Health Action Plan – Discussion Paper

Submission by Independent Schools Queensland

About Queensland Independent Schools

Queensland independent schools comprise non-government schools that are not part of the Catholic school system. They cater for students from varied socio-economic backgrounds and educate more than 119,000 students at 194 schools across more than 200 campuses, representing 15 per cent of all Queensland school students, and nearly 20 per cent of secondary students in the state. Five independent schools offer distance education to more than 3,000 students while 34 member schools cater for over 4,000 boarding students, comprising 69% of all boarding students attending non-government schools in Queensland.

Independent schools are located across the state, with 15% of independent schools classified as rural or remote using the outer regional, remote and very remote classifications of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Australian Standard Geographic Classification Remoteness Area (ASGC-RA).

Response to Feedback Questions

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) supports the Discussion Papers focus on a whole-of-community approach to mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention, suicide prevention and reducing and preventing the adverse impact of alcohol and other drugs. Independent schools have a strong commitment to pastoral care and student wellbeing and place significant importance on a student's emotional development just as they do on their academic progress. Particular emphasis is given to supporting students at transition points such as starting school in Prep and Year 1 and transitioning to secondary schooling.

ISQ recognises the challenges of providing equitable services in rural and remote locations, in particular difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff. However, ISQ believes that consistency of services across the state is imperative and that schools should have access to high quality support and training regardless of their geographic location. This is especially important in rural and remote locations where staff and students often have a higher need.

ISQ's specific responses to the Discussion Paper questions, as they relate to independent schools, are discussed below.

1. Do the priority areas for action capture the key issues that need to be addressed to improve the mental health and wellbeing of rural and remote Queenslanders?

ISQ supports Actions 27 and 28 in relation to the continued support and expansion of the Ed-LinQ initiative. Ed-LinQ staff, where they are currently available, provide an important link between independent schools and local Child and Youth Mental Health Services and other local services and can facilitate much needed professional learning for school staff. However, information about Ed-LinQ staff and services is not readily available to independent schools. This is because Ed-LinQ has no web presence and information about available services is dependent on individual Ed-LinQ staff and individual local Hospital and Health Services.

ISQ also supports Action 52 in relation to a more coordinated approach to mental health awareness training, including Mental Health First Aid, to ensure training is available state-wide. At present, training is conducted by a variety of organisations across the state with information about training also not readily available to independent schools. ISQ is often advised of training opportunities at relatively short notice, making it difficult for schools to participate. ISQ supports the development of a central website containing all available training opportunities to allow access for independent schools in a timely manner.

While supporting Actions 20 and 26 in relation to students at risk and mental health and resiliency among secondary age students in principle, ISQ notes that these actions only pertain to State schools with no involvement by independent schools. This is unhelpful as students in rural and remote communities, regardless of the school they attend, participate in the same community activities and have similar social and emotional support needs.

2. Are there other priority areas for action that need to be considered?

Additional actions for consideration

Specific suicide prevention and postvention training for school staff

The implementation of suicide prevention and postvention strategies remains a difficult issue for school staff. It is acknowledged that support is provided to schools following a suicide however schools can be hesitant to implement prevention strategies for fear of being seen as 'promoting suicide'. In rural and remote communities, the engagement of schools in all education sectors is essential to reach all children and young people potentially at risk of suicide. ISQ recommends the inclusion of actions to enhance expert guidance and support for school staff and parents in rural and remote locations to enhance prevention and postvention implementation.

Dedicated web portal of available mental health and wellbeing services and evidence based resources for schools

Independent schools are familiar with accessing information and training online and ISQ has dedicated Learning Management System, Connect&Learn, to allow school staff to participate in self-paced courses and communities of practice as well as access and share resources with ISQ and other independent schools. Schools often seek information from the web in the first instance.

There is currently very limited information available on the Queensland Government website about mental health, suicide prevention or drugs and alcohol for school staff. ISQ recognises the limitations of web based information and services, and that these are not a replacement for face-to-face services and training. However, a dedicated portal of available services would provide much needed first port of call assistance for schools.

It is acknowledged that there are a plethora of mental health resources available to schools, not all of which have a strong evidence base of effectiveness. A web portal providing information about appropriate resources, many already available online, would be highly valued by independent schools.

Inclusion of specific strategies to include independent schools

ISQ notes that Ed-LinQ staff are working closely with Department of Education and Training Regional Mental Health Coaches supporting State schools to enhance mental health prevention and early intervention. ISQ believes that the Action Plan should also include strategies to support independent schools in rural and remote locations. This could occur through local networking arrangements, for example, as schools from all three education sectors work with students from the same community.

3. What are the opportunities to build on work that is already happening?

ISQ is concerned that central coordination of mental health services, in particular Ed-LinQ, no longer exists. This means that there is no consistent delivery of services across the state and that services are determined by individual Hospital and Health Services and can be dependent on other priorities. This has the potential for differential services to be provided in different locations with rural and remote locations being most at risk of not receiving a comprehensive suite of services.

While being conscious of the need to avoid duplication of services, ISQ believes that central coordination of services can provide two important functions:

- development of resources and tools able to consistently implemented state-wide; and
- clear articulation of the standard of services that should be provided to clients, including schools, regardless of location in the state.

4. Are there any other views you would like to share?

ISQ strongly believes that enhancing the mental health and wellbeing of students, especially in rural and remote locations, requires the coordinated actions of health professionals, educators from all education sectors and parents and community members. ISQ welcomes all opportunities to work collaboratively with stakeholders to support the engagement of independent schools.

Should you require further information about ISQ's submission, you are invited to contact Mark Newham, Director (Education Services) by email: mnewham@isq.qld.edu.au or telephone 3228 1515.