

Peer Support Australia – Pre-Budget Submission 2022-23 - *Building resilience in young people by expanding the Peer Support Program in Australian Schools*

January 2022

Executive Summary

Problem	Addressing the impacts of the ‘shadow pandemic’ on young people and building resilience for future challenges
Solution	Expand the proven Peer Support Program to reach 2 million Australian students
Investment	\$5 million over three years to reach 5,000 schools

Introduction

Peer Support Australia has provided essential support to young Australians for almost 50 years through the delivery of the Peer Support Program (the Program).

The proven program operates in the government, independent and faith-based school systems across both primary and secondary cohorts, and today is currently delivered in around 1,000 schools across the country.

To respond to the pressing issues around the health and wellbeing of younger Australians, as identified in the National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and which are exacerbated by the impacts of COVID-related lockdowns, social isolation and natural disasters, Peer Support Australia recommends expanding the program to reach 2 million school-aged Australians over the next three years.

This would involve expanding the program from its current footprint of around 1,000 schools to 5,000 schools.

Due to Peer Support Australia’s established presence in the Australian education system and long track-record of facilitating the take up of the program, implementation of an expanded program could be efficiently operationalised.

About the Peer Support Program

The Peer Support Program is implemented across Primary and Secondary schools and represented equally in Government, Catholic Systemic, and Independent Schools, including faith-based schools. The universality of the Program allows it to sit comfortably within all school sectors and school communities.

Currently, Peer Support Australia provides around 1,000 schools with developmentally appropriate and tested resources needed to run the Program.

These resources include community awareness raising videos, planning and evaluation tools, student leadership training materials, introductory sessions, high school orientation materials, wellbeing modules and other activities for flexible learning modes. Peer Support Australia also provides this necessary training to schools to implement the program.

The Primary School Program

The Primary School Program comprises eight (8) evidence-informed 30-minute sessions for Peer Leaders to facilitate with their younger peers, plus support materials.

There are four (4) modules for schools to choose:

- **Optimism** – Promoting optimism in students, and the ability to use their personal strengths to feel more positive and capable.
- **Resilience** – Cultivating resilience in students by exploring protective factors and strategies used in new and changing situations.
- **Relationships** – Exploring the skills and attitudes necessary to maintain friendships and positively interact with others.
- **Anti-bullying** – Building on students' capacity to prevent and respond to unhelpful and unhealthy behaviours.

The Secondary School Program

The Secondary School Program comprises eight (8) evidence-informed 40-minute sessions for Peer Leaders to facilitate with their younger peers, plus support materials.

There are three (3) modules for schools to choose:

- **Resilience** – Focusing on the influence our thoughts have on the way we view experiences and supporting students to learn and practice strategies to enable growth.
- **Anti-bullying** – Promoting a strengths-based approach to reduce harmful behaviours and develop strategies to strengthen and repair relationships.
- **Influence & Integrity** – providing students with opportunities to consider factors influencing individuals and communities, and how they can communicate and act as respectful people of integrity.

Each module comprises eight (8) x 40-minute sessions for Peer Leaders to facilitate with their younger peers.

A new Primary and Secondary Module on Consent and Relationships will be added to the suite of programs in 2022.

As part of the program, Peer Support Australia also builds capacity within schools by engaging with school executives and teacher training for sustained, long-term student support within schools.

Efficacy of the Program

A report by Deakin University, Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development (2020) commissioned by Peer Support Australia, found that:

“The PSA Program is organised within a coherent framework that offers multilayered and structured assistance to schools to enhance peer relationships and positive youth development. PSA is the only peer support program internationally to have been evaluated in a published rigorous school trial that demonstrated school-wide benefits.”¹

Case studies

“Each year and for many years now, the Margaret River Independent School facilitate The Peer Support Program and it is amazing to see our year 6 students step up into the leadership space and challenge themselves. We regularly see year 6 students who aren't natural leaders, thrive at supporting and leading their younger peers when given the opportunity.

The Peer Support Program brings a lot of joy to our students, and is so effective at developing stronger connections, relationships and support structures across year levels in our school community.”

Mike Bezant, Chaplain, Margaret River Independent School WA

“The Thriving Through Transitions Mini Module provided a perfect resource for transitioning our students back from COVID lockdown and remote learning. The Transition Module was an invaluable way of reconnecting our Peer Support Leaders with their Peer Support groups. There were many challenges faced during lockdown time and remote learning, and our girls were able to draw on these experiences and make important connections with others about the qualities, people, and strategies that were important to them in dealing with the changes. The four activity sheets were perfect. They were useful and engaging and the timing for use of these resources was so beneficial to both the Peer Support groups and the Peer Support Leaders.”

Angela Cofini, Wellbeing Coordinator, Bethlehem Catholic College NSW

¹ Ellis et al, 2009 cited in Promoting Positive Youth Development in Schools: a program logic analysis of Peer Support Australia, p. 9

Problem

We know the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions have hit young people particularly hard.

We also know the devastating effects other crises, like natural disasters, economic shocks and associated social dislocation can have on young people in our local communities.

From bushfires to floods, droughts and health emergencies, there is a lot that is thrown at young people, and we owe it to them to prepare them for an uncertain future.

Importantly, policymakers across the country have recognised the need to focus on resilience building at a local level, to help communities rebuild after these shocks, but also to mitigate and prevent them in the future.

The crucial piece missing in this response is the resilience of our young people, those that are feeling the brunt of the 'shadow pandemic' in the current COVID climate and following natural disasters, which has been highlighted by:

- Recent [modelling](#) by the University of Sydney's Brain and Mind Centre demonstrating the significant impact of restrictions on young people.
- Data from NSW Health and [reported](#) by the Sydney Morning Herald, that in the year to July 29, 8,489 people under the age of 18 were rushed to hospital for self-harm and suicidal ideation, equating to more than 40 a day. That was a 31 per cent rise on the same time in 2020 and up 47 per cent compared with 2019.
- Suicide-prevention hotline [Lifeline](#) recording six of its busiest days on record in August this year.
- Research published in the [Medical Journal of Australia's \(MJA\)](#) special supplement on Evidence Gaps in Rural Research following the devastating 2019/20 bushfire season, which showed an increased risk of poorer mental health outcomes for children as a result of bushfires.

Finally, the recently released National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, identifies: "In Australia, half of all adult mental health challenges emerge before the age of 14 and more than 50% of children experiencing mental health challenges are not receiving professional help."

Therefore, a stronger focus on supporting more young Australians to build resilience and improve their wellbeing is urgently needed.

Solution

In response to this issue, Peer Support Australia is recommending the Australian Government invests \$5 million over three years to scale up the Peer Support Program, expanding its reach to 5,000 schools.

This would increase student coverage engagement to more than 1.3 million students directly and impact up to approximately 2 million students more broadly.

This investment will grow the program from 1,000 schools per annum to around 5,000 schools across Australia. Specifically, this funding will allow:

- Access to the suite of up-to-date resources included in the Program for students to learn and practice the skills and strategies to better navigate the ups and downs of life and relationships, including across the four modules of Optimism, Resilience, Relationships and Anti-bullying.
- Enhancements to the school staff online learning system to improve accessibility.
- Staff to engage with and support school communities and provide school community (staff, parents and students) training and development.

This approach aligns with the focus of the National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, which states: “Every child deserves the right to be supported and grow in a safe and healthy environment. To achieve this, Australia requires a nationally consistent mental health and wellbeing system that supports all children, and their communities, to thrive.”

Additionally, as per Focus area 3 of the Strategy, ‘Education Settings’, a priority action includes: “Providing funding to implement quality improvement activities and delivery of evidence-based programs targeting needs identified in wellbeing plans (action 3.2.b, 3.2.c).”

This action item aligns closely with the program and its expansion.

Implementation and Costing

Due to Peer Support Australia’s established and well-respected presence in the Australian education system and long track-record of facilitating the take up of the Program, implementation of an expanded program could be efficiently operationalised.

This is important, as it allows for the Program to be ramped up expeditiously and respond to urgent demand in the community.

The below table sets out the indicative costing breakdown over three years.

	FY 1	FY 2	FY 3	Total
Program resource development	\$175,000	\$455,000	\$700,000	\$1,330,000
Enhancements to the school staff online learning system	\$120,000	-	-	\$120,000
Resourcing to support roll out	\$1,198,800	\$1,169,700	\$1,181,500	\$3,550,000
Total	\$1,493,800	\$1,624,700	\$1,881,500	\$5,000,000

About Peer Support Australia

Peer Support Australia is a national non-profit organisation, which has been working with schools across Australia for almost 50 years. We provide essential support to Australian schools to positively impact the wellbeing of children and young people.

Peer Support Australia knows that healthier relationships, positive school culture and improved student wellbeing can be cultivated by:

- providing students with Social and Emotional knowledge and skills
- partnering with parents to develop a shared language for guiding students through emotional responses and interactions with others
- supporting teachers to value student voice; and involve students in decisions about their school and learning.

We work with communities across Australia to develop happy, confident and resilient young people.

Peer Support Australia's Vice Regal Patrons are His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd) and Her Excellency Mrs Linda Hurley.

Contact

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