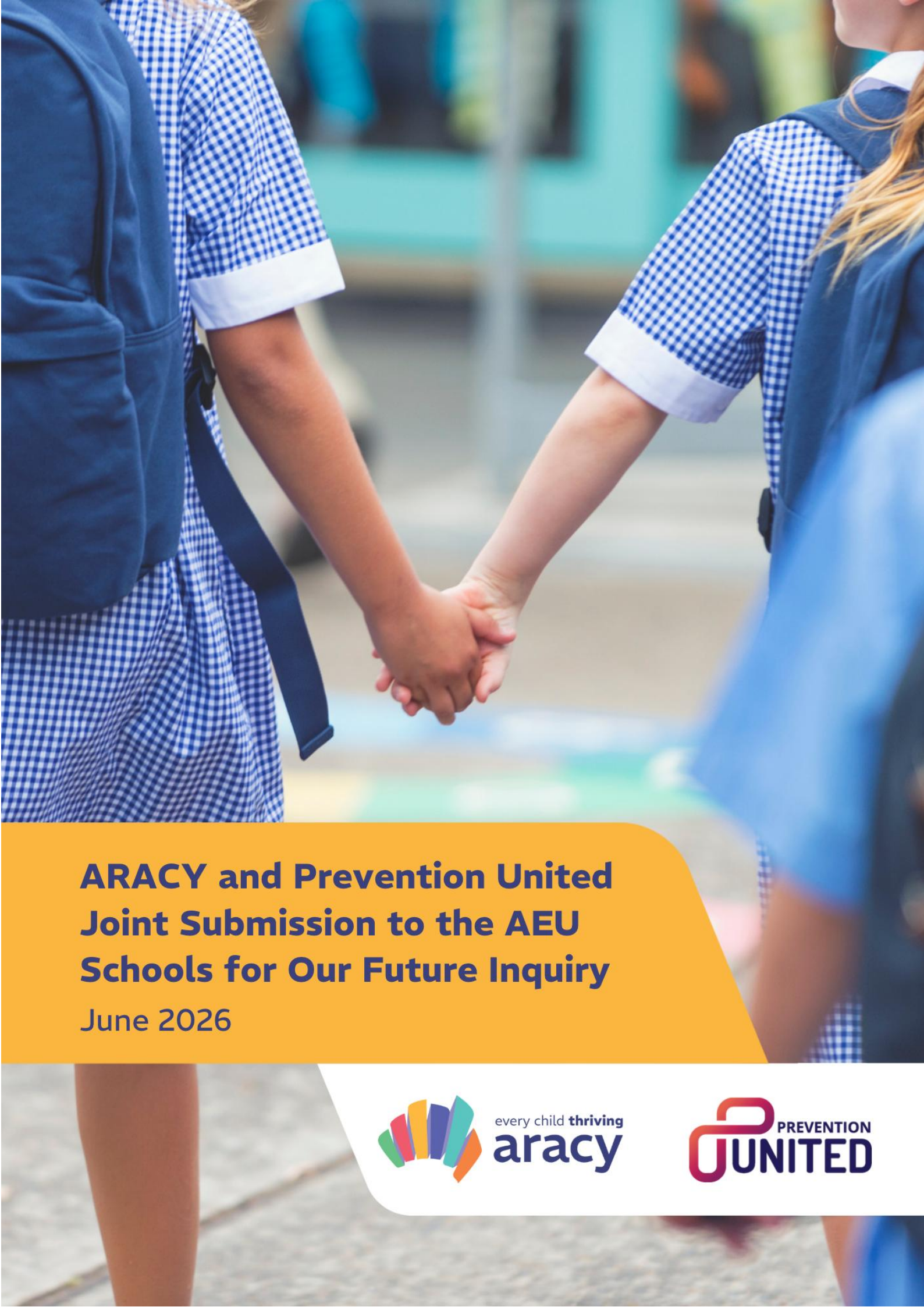


ARACY and Prevention United Joint Submission to the AEU Schools for Our Future Inquiry

June 2026

every child thriving aracy

PREVENTION UNITED

Joint Submission to the

Schools for Our Future

National Inquiry into Australia's Public School Infrastructure Needs

National Wellbeing Measurement Framework for School Infrastructure

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)
and
Prevention United

June 2026

Acknowledgement of Country

ARACY and Prevention United acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live, work, learn and play. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded.

We acknowledge that Australia's First Nations peoples hold the world's longest continuing cultures. Their knowledge systems, connection to Country and holistic understanding of wellbeing have sustained communities for tens of thousands of years.

When it comes to education, the Australian Education Union and its campaign allies have a unique opportunity to listen to and action the words of young First Nations students who inspired at the Garma Festival in 2019 when they said:

> *Set an imagination agenda for our classrooms, remove the limited thinking around our disadvantage, stop looking at us as a problem to fix, set us free to be the solution and give us the stage to light up the world.*
>
> *We want the Imagination agenda in every school in the nation, from early childhood learning centres through to our most prominent universities.*
>
> *To our Prime Minister & Education Ministers, we call on you to meet with us and to work on an imagination plan for our country's education system, for all of us.*
> *We are not the problem, we are the solution."*
>
> — The Imagination Declaration, Garma Youth Forum, 2019

About ARACY

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) is a national evidence-to-policy organisation. ARACY works with government, research, the not-for-profit sector and communities to improve outcomes for children and young people aged 0 to 24 years.

ARACY is the custodian of **The Nest**, Australia's national wellbeing framework for children and young people. The Nest was developed through consultation with more than 4,000 children, young people and experts, in partnership with 150 organisations. It measures wellbeing across six interconnected domains: Valued, Loved and Safe; Healthy; Learning; Participating; Material Basics; and a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture.

ARACY's work is guided by the principle that what surrounds a child shapes that child. This ecological perspective, grounded in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1979), recognises that children develop within layers of influence: their family, school, community and the broader policy environment. School infrastructure is one of the most tangible expressions of this principle. The physical environment in which a child learns directly shapes their health, safety, belonging and capacity to thrive.

ARACY's website is www.aracy.org.au

About Prevention United

Prevention United is a mental health promotion charity founded in 2018 and based in Melbourne. Prevention United's focus is on preventing depression and anxiety, not treating them. The organisation works across research, advocacy and community engagement to shift the national approach from crisis response to prevention.

A key feature of Prevention United's work is its **Youth Ambassadors Group (YAG)**, a group of young people aged 16 to 21 who co-develop policy briefs and contribute their lived experience to national policy conversations. The YAG has produced two school specific policy briefs to date, including "Systemic policy responses to 'whole-of-school' wellbeing approaches" (August 2025) and "Different paths, equal value: Young people's perspectives on post-school pathways" (November 2025).

As one YAG member put it: "Schools are the largest petri dishes of culture. If we want a future where youth wellbeing is not just prioritised but woven into everyday learning, we must nurture it from the very place where culture begins … the school setting."[1]

Prevention United works across science, policy and systems to embed prevention everywhere people live, learn, work and play. Its expertise spans mental wellbeing promotion and the prevention of mental health conditions — the upstream end of the public health spectrum that school environments are well placed to support.

Prevention United's website is www.preventionunited.org.au

About The Nest Wellbeing Framework

The Nest is Australia's wellbeing framework for children and young people developed by ARACY. It provides a shared language for measuring what matters in children's lives. The Nest was built through a results-based accountability process and is regularly updated with feedback from practitioners, children and their families.

The Nest measures wellbeing across six interconnected domains:

- **Valued, Loved and Safe** — Children feel valued in loving and secure environments.
- **Healthy** — Children's physical, developmental, psychosocial and mental health needs are met.
- **Learning** — Children are fully engaged in learning that enables them to reach their full potential.
- **Participating** — Children are involved in decision-making that affects them.
- **Material Basics** — Children have access to what they need to live a healthy life.
- **Positive Sense of Identity and Culture** — Children have a strong sense of self, including cultural identity.

These domains are interdependent. A child cannot learn effectively in a building that is too hot. A child cannot feel safe if their counselling room requires a public walk past classmates. A teacher cannot support student wellbeing if they have no private space of their own. The Nest captures these connections to physical infrastructure.

Critically, The Nest centres the child within Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979) (**Diagram 1**). Infrastructure does not only affect students. It shapes the teachers, education support staff, families and communities who surround them. The inquiry's own Terms of Reference recognise this: they ask about student outcomes **and** staff effectiveness, motivation, wellbeing and retention. The Nest provides the measurement framework to report on both.

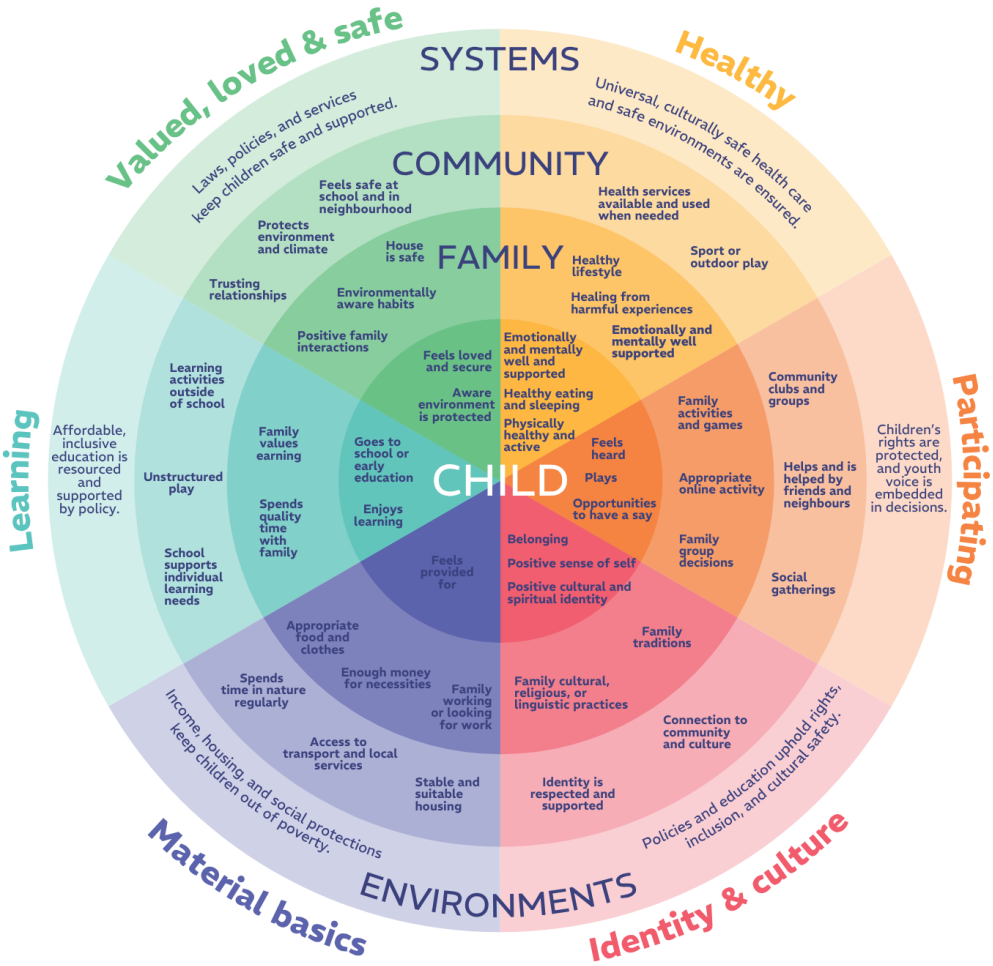
The Nest has been adopted by more than 250 organisations across Australia, including Federal, State, Territory and local government agencies, health services, schools and community organisations. In the Schools for Our Future inquiry, it offers an existing, tested framework for national infrastructure reporting — without building a new bureaucracy.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, The Nest's sixth domain — a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture — recognises that cultural safety and connection to Country are not supplementary. They are foundational to wellbeing. This aligns directly with the inquiry's Terms of Reference, which prioritise the infrastructure needs of Aboriginal communities and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In a paper submitted for publication in 2026 that can be provided to AEU on request, ARACY reports on how it partnered with Indigenous researchers and communities over 2 years (2024-25) to ask Aboriginal children aged 8 to 14 what a good life looks like. The children confirmed The Nest's domains hold true — but told us **participation** can't just be one box among many. It has to be the lens through which *everything else is understood*.

We invite the AEU to consider the wisdom of these Aboriginal children to ensure the **Schools of the Future** help them reach their full potential. Considering the power of schools as a place to support their holistic wellbeing which *includes* academic success.

Diagram 1: The Nest displayed as an ecological model.



About the Dual-Continuum Model of Mental Health

The Dual-Continuum Model (Keyes, 2005) shown in Diagram 2 establishes that mental ill-health (horizontal axis) and mental wellbeing (vertical axis) are distinct, overlapping states. A student can experience low wellbeing (languishing) or high wellbeing (flourishing) regardless of a clinical diagnosis.

This framework maps four distinct quadrants of student experience:

- Flourishing / No Illness: High wellbeing; emotionally and socially thriving.
- Flourishing / Illness: Thriving and engaged while managing a condition or neurodivergence.

- Languishing / No Illness: Undiagnosed but disconnected, unmotivated, and empty.
- Languishing / Illness: Facing clinical distress alongside low subjective wellbeing.

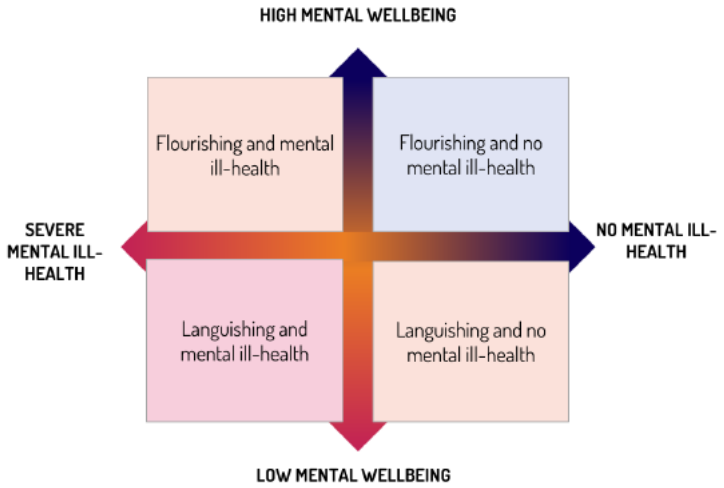
Application to School Infrastructure

Legacy school funding reactively targets the *languishing/illness* quadrant by building tertiary crisis infrastructure (like isolated counseling rooms). While necessary, this reactive posture fails to prevent students from languishing in the first place.

The physical environment is a powerful lever to alter these trajectories:

- The Barrier: Substandard spaces (poor acoustics, extreme heat, lack of low-sensory retreat options) induce chronic environmental fatigue, pushing vulnerable students down the axis into *languishing*.
- The Solution: Prioritizing universal primary prevention infrastructure (superior ventilation, natural light, green spaces, and accessible "soft-entry" zones) lifts the baseline of the vertical axis. This provides the environmental foundation required for *all* students to *flourish*.

Diagram 2: Dual-Continuum Model of Mental Health



Keyes, C. L. M. 2005. Mental illness and/or mental health? Investigating axioms of the complete state model of health. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology 73(3): 539.

Executive Summary

Australia has no national standard for measuring whether school buildings help children thrive. The Nest can provide one.

The gap. Every state and territory measures school infrastructure differently. There is no shared way to compare a school in Western Sydney with one in regional Queensland. Audits track bricks and mortar, not wellbeing. Yet the building a child learns in shapes their health, safety, belonging and learning.

The solution. Adopt The Nest as the national measurement framework for school infrastructure. The Nest is Australia's wellbeing framework for children and young people. It is already used by more than 250 organisations. It measures six domains: Valued, Loved and Safe; Healthy; Learning; Participating; Material Basics; and a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture. Applying it to infrastructure is a ready-made solution, not a new bureaucracy.

A public health approach. Spread infrastructure investment across three tiers, matched to need. Primary prevention builds healthy environments for everyone — light, air, shade, green space. Secondary prevention adds early-support spaces. Tertiary prevention provides crisis and counselling spaces. A school that builds only counselling rooms will always be overwhelmed by demand.

Children, staff and community together. What surrounds a child shapes that child. Buildings shape students, the teachers who support them and the families around them. Staff wellbeing is a precondition for student wellbeing, not a separate issue. Schools work best as community hubs that are safe, inclusive and climate-ready.

Our recommendations at a glance

- **Adopt The Nest** as the national measurement framework for school infrastructure.
- **Audit against all six domains** so every audit measures wellbeing, not just physical condition.
- **Apply a public health approach,** prioritising primary prevention for all students and staff.
- **Prioritise First Nations needs,** with planning led by and designed with First Nations peoples.
- **Design schools as community hubs,** co-locating family, health and community services on site.
- **Embed climate resilience** in standards, designed for future conditions, not historical averages.
- **Recognise staff wellbeing** as a precondition for student wellbeing, with staff-facing spaces in every standard.
- **Build mental health infrastructure** in every public school, removing the 'walk of shame' to help.
- **Invest in healthy school food infrastructure,** starting with communities experiencing disadvantage.

1. The case for a national wellbeing measurement framework

Australia has no national standard for reporting on public school infrastructure. Each state and territory uses its own system. There is no consistent way to compare the condition of a primary school in Western Sydney with one in regional Queensland or suburban Perth.

The Schools for Our Future inquiry has identified this gap. Theme 6 of the inquiry's Terms of Reference asks how Australia can improve national coordination and funding of public school infrastructure.

ARACY and Prevention United propose a solution: adopt The Nest wellbeing framework as the national measurement standard for school infrastructure reporting. The Nest provides a ready-made, evidence-based framework that maps every aspect of school infrastructure to measurable child and youth wellbeing outcomes.

This is not a new idea. It applies an existing national framework — already used by more than 250 organisations — to a specific policy problem. Every classroom, playground, counselling room and staff workspace either supports or undermines the six domains of child wellbeing that The Nest measures.

As Prevention United's Youth Ambassadors put it: "Wellbeing should be measured the same way academic outcomes are measured and reported."[2]

A public health approach to school infrastructure

A true public health approach to prevention recognises the importance of the build environment on wellbeing outcomes, and relies on proportional universalism. This means distributing prevention initiatives to according to need.

This approach operates across three tiers:

Primary prevention (universal): Services and environments available to every student and staff member. In school infrastructure terms, this means buildings that promote health, safety and learning for all — good ventilation, natural light, green space, accessible design and welcoming entry points.

Secondary prevention (early intervention): Targeted support for those showing early signs of risk. In infrastructure terms, this means purpose-built wellbeing hubs, drop-in spaces, early identification rooms and flexible breakout areas where students can access support before a concern escalates.

Tertiary prevention (response): Intensive support for those already experiencing harm. In infrastructure terms, this means private counselling rooms, multi-agency meeting spaces, on-site clinical rooms and crisis-response areas.

Infrastructure should do more than respond to crisis. It should lift wellbeing for everyone. Mental wellbeing and mental ill-health are two linked but separate things[3]. A student can be languishing without a diagnosis, or flourishing while managing a condition (Dual-Continuum Model of Mental Health). Well-designed environments help move students

from languishing toward flourishing — not only treat those in crisis. This is the case for investing first in primary prevention.

The school years are the key window. Half of all mental health conditions emerge before age 15, and three-quarters before 25[4]. Around 40% of young people aged 16–24 experience a mental disorder each year[5]. Building environments that promote wellbeing during school is one of the most effective upstream investments Australia can make.

This tiered model is already embedded in Australia's most promising whole-of-school wellbeing initiatives. Victoria's Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu, for example, structures its evidence-based programs across universal, early intervention and targeted tiers.[6]

The domain table in Section 2 applies this logic. It maps The Nest's six wellbeing domains to specific infrastructure requirements at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. A school that only builds counselling rooms (tertiary) without investing in environments that promote wellbeing for everyone (primary) will always be overwhelmed by demand.

Programs alone are not enough. The Australian Government invested $203.7m in the 2023 Student Wellbeing Boost and $307.18m over 2023–27 in the National Student Wellbeing Program, alongside similar state investment. Yet population-level wellbeing for children and young people keeps declining[7]. Programs delivered in environments that work against wellbeing will always struggle. The building is the lever we have left to pull.

As one young person told Prevention United: "Current mental health resources often act as 'bandaid' solutions. Addressing immediate symptoms without tackling the deeper, systemic causes."[8]

The built environment remains an underused lever for mental health prevention. Wellbeing is rarely treated as an explicit criterion in how school buildings are planned, funded, designed or evaluated, despite growing evidence of its importance. Well-designed schools can shape wellbeing positively, supporting emotional regulation, social connection and inclusive participation, alongside other benefits such as improved attention and learning. Poorly designed environments, by contrast, can create real barriers to attendance and engagement. These effects are felt most acutely by students with sensory, cultural or emotional safety needs (Cleveland et al., 2025) — a substantial population, given that around 1 in 4 Australian school students (27.0%) received a disability adjustment in 2025, including 28.6% in government schools, 24.4% in independent schools and 24.3% in Catholic schools.

Environments shape who can stay in the room. The issue is rarely the student. It is learning environments that are not built for them. One study found 92.1% of children experiencing school distress are neurodivergent, and 94.3% of attendance problems were underpinned by emotional distress[9]. Withdrawal and regulation spaces, low-sensory corners and soft-entry zones give these students a way to stay connected to school rather than being sent home.

Teachers, too, are affected by school infrastructure, yet they are often left out of this conversation despite being overwhelmed and at risk of poor mental health. Teachers experience disproportionately high levels of depression, anxiety and stress compared to the general population (Granziera et al., 2025), and more than a third (35%) of Australian classroom teachers intend to leave the profession before retirement, citing workload or wellbeing concerns (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2025).

Improving the physical conditions teachers work in, and ensuring adequate standards for staff spaces that recognise their challenges and unique needs may be a meaningful lever for both retention and wellbeing.

2. The Nest: a ready-made national framework

The following table combines the public health approach with The Nest's six wellbeing domains. It maps each domain to the infrastructure the inquiry should measure. Each domain affects not only children but the teachers, principals, education support staff and families who surround them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The inquiry's Terms of Reference recognise this — measuring both student outcomes and staff effectiveness, motivation, wellbeing and retention.

Linking The Nest to Australia's international obligations. The Nest's six domains align directly with Australia's commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The CRC, which Australia ratified in 1990, establishes the rights of every child to health, education, safety, participation and cultural identity. The SDGs set measurable global targets for achieving these rights by 2030.

The table below includes *examples* of infrastructure design segmented by the wellbeing domain they can most contribute to. Each domain is linked to relevant CRC articles and SDG goals. When the inquiry measures school infrastructure against The Nest, it simultaneously measures Australia's progress toward its international commitments.[10]

Nest Domain	Infrastructure the inquiry should measure
Healthy **SDGs 2, 3, 6** CRC Arts 24, 33, 39	**Primary - Prevention** • **Ventilation, cooling, heating, air filtration and natural light** → prevents cognitive drop-offs in heat, improves attention across the whole day Peer-reviewed building science confirms that inadequate ventilation measurably reduces student cognitive performance, with gains of up to 15% when air quality and thermal comfort are improved.[11] • **Shade over all high-use outdoor areas (playgrounds, lunch spaces)** → reduces heat stress, keeps kids outside and active instead of confined indoors Research confirms that thermal discomfort in outdoor school environments significantly reduces physical activity levels and drives students indoors, increasing sedentary behaviour.[12] • **Minimum green space per student (trees, grass, not concrete)** → reduces behavioural incidents and improves baseline mental regulation A landmark study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) found that childhood exposure to green space is associated with significantly lower risk of psychiatric disorders in adolescence and adulthood.[13]
	Secondary - Early Intervention • **Purpose-built wellbeing hubs and drop-in mental health spaces** → students overwhelmingly prefer to access care in a single, trusted "one-stop-shop" at school rather than navigating external clinics Monash University research confirms that young people strongly prefer a single, accessible hub for health and mental health needs rather than navigating separate external services, increasing the likelihood they will seek help at all.[14]

	• **Infrastructure adaptations for "withdrawal and regulation" (acoustic pods or localized low-sensory corners within standard classrooms)** → provides immediate, localized relief for students experiencing escalating sensory overload before a behavioral crisis occurs. sensory regulation rooms and quiet breakout areas → to lower hyperactive behavior and improves attention spans. Research on sensory rooms in schools demonstrates measurable reductions in anxiety and dysregulation among neurodivergent students when low-sensory withdrawal spaces are physically embedded within classrooms.[15] • Early **identification and screening rooms** → reduce the stigma around child mental health. Victorian evidence and the Centre for Community Child Health confirm that school-embedded screening spaces increase early help-seeking and reduce the stigma that prevents students from accessing mental health support.[16] • **Cool rooms / low-stimulation indoor retreat spaces during extreme heat days** → prevents escalation (fatigue → irritability → behaviour issues) The Sydney Children's Hospital Network confirms that extreme heat directly impairs children's emotional regulation, increasing anxiety, irritability and behavioural outbursts.[17]
	Tertiary - Response • **Private counselling and therapy rooms** → providing physical privacy, soundproofing, and natural light directly affect how safe a person feels to share confidential information USC research confirms that the physical qualities of counselling spaces — particularly privacy, soundproofing and natural light — directly affect how safe young people feel to share personal information.[18] • **On-site clinical spaces for visiting allied health professionals** → reduces learning disruptions of students as well as the stress and employment disruptions of parents and care givers who need to transport them (transmitting more anxiety to the student) . Monash University research with Australian school staff found that on-site allied health access significantly reduces family disruption and student disengagement from learning.[19] • **Multi-agency meeting rooms for coordinated care** → reduces communication errors between members of the student's care team. Victorian child protection frameworks require coordinated care teams for children with complex needs — a model that demands dedicated multi-agency meeting infrastructure within or near school settings.[20]
Learning **SDGs 4, 8, 9** CRC Arts 17, 28, 29	**Primary - Prevention** • **Classrooms designed for multiple modes at once (quiet corners + group tables)** → reduces disruption because different learners aren't forced into one mode. Providing physical choices prevents spatial anxiety. Research confirms that flexible classroom layouts — including quiet corners, small-group tables and movement zones — reduce disruption and support diverse learning needs simultaneously.[21] • **Built-in acoustic treatment (not echo chambers)** → improves attention, comprehension, especially for kids with language or attention issues. Reduces voice strain and fatigue of teachers too. Macquarie University research demonstrates that poor classroom acoustics disproportionately harm students with language difficulties, hearing impairments and attention disorders.[22] • **Universal digital access (reliable Wi-Fi + devices)** → avoids whole cohorts falling behind due to infrastructure equity gaps. Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) evidence confirms that unequal

	digital access creates measurable educational inequity across socioeconomic and geographic lines.[23]
	Secondary - Early Intervention • **Small-group teaching rooms directly adjacent to classrooms** → allows immediate pull-out support without stigma or lost transition time. UNSW's teaching evidence confirms that dedicated small-group learning spaces improve engagement and accelerate skill development compared with in-class differentiation that can stigmatise students.[24] • **Flexible scheduling spaces (can split or combine classes quickly)** → lets teachers respond to learning gaps in real time . Victoria's FISO evidence base confirms that flexible physical environments enabling rapid regrouping are central to a positive climate for learning.[25] • **Targeted literacy/numeracy intervention rooms with specialist resources** → accelerates catch-up before kids fall years behind. Victoria's intervention policy requires dedicated small-group spaces immediately accessible from mainstream classrooms to enable timely literacy and numeracy support without stigmatising students.[26]
	Tertiary - Response • **Intensive support classrooms (low student numbers, high support)** → keeps highly disengaged or struggling students in school instead of exclusion/expulsion and more harmful behaviour. The Commissioner for Children and Young People found that schools with dedicated intensive support infrastructure are significantly better at retaining vulnerable students than those relying on exclusionary responses.[27] • **Re-engagement spaces separate from mainstream classrooms** → provides a reset environment for students at risk of dropping out. Australian education research documents that schools without dedicated re-engagement spaces disproportionately apply exclusionary discipline to their most vulnerable students, worsening long-term outcomes.[28] • **Integrated access to specialist staff (speech, psych, etc.) onsite** → creates fewer learning disruptions and better health results for children and young people than standard, separate care systems. Orygen and Murdoch Children's Research Institute both confirm that fragmented, off-site specialist services create significant delays and missed opportunities for children's mental health care.[29] • **Systemic eradication and structural remediation of legacy toxic materials (proactive asbestos, lead, and PFAS removal)** → eliminates acute environmental hazards permanently rather than merely "managing" them in situ. Every state and territory currently maintains separate asbestos management registers for schools, highlighting the absence of a national proactive remediation standard.[30]
Material Basics **SDGs 1, 2, 6, 7, 11** CRC Arts 26, 27	**Primary - Prevention** • **National minimum standard (no mould, leaks, broken toilets, unsafe temps)** → halving the odds of student absenteeism. Temperature control prevents poor cognitive performance. A UNSW global study confirms that rising temperatures are measurably reducing student learning outcomes worldwide, with Australian students particularly exposed.[31] • **Fully accessible design as default (ramps, lifts, toilets everywhere)** → avoids exclusion before it happens Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) documents systemic exclusion

of students with disability arising directly from inaccessible school infrastructure.[32]

- **Reliable utilities (power, water, internet)** → stops learning disruption as a normal condition. Australian research confirms that students without reliable school internet access fall significantly behind peers, with COVID-19 exposing the severity of this infrastructure equity gap.[33]
- **Filtered water stations, community gardens and kitchens** → Give everyone easy access to clean water. Grow fresh food on school grounds for families. Facilities to enable a school lunches program for low SES schools to ensure all students have adequate nutritious meals without stigma. Evidence confirms that school-based food programs — including community gardens and school lunch initiatives — improve nutrition, learning readiness and social cohesion, especially for low-income families.[34]
- **Permanent, inclusive sanitary dispensing infrastructure in all washrooms** → ends period poverty and removes a physiological barrier to educational participation without requiring students to ask permission. Share the Dignity's 2024 national survey found that period poverty remains a significant barrier to school attendance, with many students missing school when they cannot access menstrual products.[35]

Secondary - Early Intervention

- **Automated, objective infrastructure condition audits that trigger capital works funding (rather than political cycles)** → fixes building degradation before it becomes an occupational health and safety hazard or unusable. A Victorian Auditor-General's report and NSW integrity inquiries both found that school infrastructure funding was subject to political influence rather than objective condition-based assessment.[36]
- **Devolved, rapid minor-works infrastructure funding pools at the school level** → enables principals to immediately remediate urgent structural issues (e.g., mould, broken HVAC, leaking roofs) instead of waiting years for departmental approval. Prevents secondary health crises like black mould and asthma/allergy. University of Melbourne research on innovative learning environments confirms that schools with devolved maintenance budgets respond more rapidly to physical problems and maintain better learning conditions.[37]
- **Targeted structural retrofitting for known infrastructural gaps** (e.g., replacing demountables to reduce overcrowding, DDA-compliance retrofits) → addresses emerging physical inequity before it compounds into educational exclusion.

Tertiary - Response

- **Emergency capital response (flood, fire, structural failure)** → Schools act as critical infrastructure and vital "community hubs" during and after crises. keeps school open or rapidly reopens. The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements and the NSW Independent Flood Inquiry both found that school buildings are critical community infrastructure whose resilience must be planned and funded proactively.[38]
- **Replacement of buildings past design life (not patching)** → stops money being wasted on failing assets and stops sub-standard learning environments that compromise educational outcomes. The Victorian Auditor-General found that continued patching of buildings beyond their design life costs more than replacement while delivering persistently substandard learning environments.[39]
- **Temporary high-quality modular builds (not old demountables)** → maintains learning continuity without degrading

	conditions. University of Melbourne research demonstrates that modern prefabricated school buildings can match the quality of permanent construction at lower cost and with significantly shorter timelines.[40]
Participating **SDGs 10, 16, 17** CRC Arts 12, 13, 15, 31	**Primary - Prevention** • **Student co-design built into every project (actual decisions, not surveys)** → spaces get used properly because they reflect real behaviour and spatial needs. Fostering deeper civic agency and ownership over he school environment. Universal Design for Learning Australia confirms that co-design processes with young people produce school environments that are better used, better maintained and more effective at supporting diverse needs.[41] • **"Third spaces" (non-classroom areas for hanging out, creating, socialising)** → reduces conflict in corridors/playgrounds and improves belonging. Learning Environments Australia research and design awards demonstrate that third spaces are among the most effective infrastructure investments for student wellbeing and belonging.[42] • **Open access areas and extended-hours community infrastructure (libraries, sporting facilities, and co-located hubs)** → increases family connections to school and reduces disengagement. Fosters a profound sense of community ownership over the physical campus, provides a secure space outside regular hours, and reduces student alienation. Victoria's Shared Facilities Fund demonstrates that co-locating community and cultural infrastructure within school grounds substantially increases community connection and reduces youth disengagement.[43] • **Purpose-Built Student Governance and Advocacy Hubs** → structurally legitimises student voice and embeds democratic agency into the campus footprint. Rather than the Student Representative Council (SRC) or other community-focused student groups meeting in a spare classroom or a teacher's office, schools should feature a dedicated space strictly governed by the student body. International examples of purpose-built student leadership centres show that dedicated physical infrastructure for student voice significantly increases civic engagement and democratic agency among young people.[44] • **Kinetic circulation and "playful architecture"** (e.g., indoor slides, interactive corridors, immersive thematic environments) → radically shifts the psychological perception of school from a sterile, institutional workplace to a place of joy and discovery, acting as a universal primary prevention against disengagement by making the campus inherently fun to attend. Award-winning school architecture internationally demonstrates that incorporating movement, play and joy into the physical fabric of school buildings fundamentally transforms students' relationship to learning.[45]
	Secondary - Early Intervention • **Targeted engagement spaces for specific cohorts** (e.g. girls-only spaces, neurodivergent-friendly rooms) → provides an immediate, safe infrastructural anchor for students exhibiting early signs of sensory overload or anxiety-induced distress, allowing them to self-regulate and return to class rather than being sent home or suspended. Victoria's Inclusive Schools Fund and InclusionEd both demonstrate that purpose-built neurodivergent-affirming spaces reduce crisis incidents and improve attendance for students who might otherwise be excluded.[46] • **"Soft-Entry" Wellbeing Hubs (Architecturally distinct arrival zones separate from the main gates))** → acts as an infrastructural triage zone for students exhibiting early stages of school refusal,

	severe social anxiety, or chronic lateness, allowing them to cross the school boundary without facing the overwhelming sensory assault of the general playground or homeroom. Melbourne's Hester Hornbrook Academy demonstrates the power of architecturally distinct, non-institutional entry environments in supporting young people experiencing school refusal to re-engage with learning.[47] • **Supervised informal spaces (not just classrooms or playgrounds)** → catches early signs of disengagement before attendance drops. E.g. Innovative Learning Spaces. University of Melbourne's ILETC research found that supervised informal spaces — distinct from classrooms and playgrounds — are consistently among the most highly valued environments by both students and teachers.[48]
	Tertiary - Response • **Purpose-built, onsite alternative learning infrastructure (e.g., dedicated artisan workshops or "school-within-a-school" annexes** → provides a distinct, non-traditional physical setting on the main campus, allowing severely disengaged students to access flexible, hands-on education without severing their physical tether to the broader school community. Hands On Learning Australia and the Berry Street Education Model show that trades-based and hands-on learning infrastructure enables highly disengaged young people to re-engage through purpose-built practical environments.[49] • **Intensive re-engagement and stabilisation** → replaces authoritative, clinical office layouts with neutral, domestic-scaled environments (like central kitchens and lounges), breaking down institutional power dynamics to rebuild trust with severely alienated youth. • **Integrated education, health and youth service precincts.** → School environments that co-locate allied health, youth work, family support, mentoring, and vocational services, enabling coordinated intervention for young people facing multiple and compounding risks.. Australian examples including Mabel Park State High School's built-in Health Hub (under the Kalgal Burnbona integrated care model) and Victoria's Pavilion School demonstrate that integrated service precincts within school grounds produce measurably better outcomes for young people with the highest levels of need.[50] • **Flexible transition and alternative pathway infrastructure, including online.** → Multiple low-barrier entry points into learning, including flexible schools, blended learning models, online education, and transitional programs that allow young people to re-enter education through pathways matched to their circumstances, readiness, and aspirations. EREA's national Blended Learning model and Flexi Schools demonstrate that flexible, low-barrier alternative pathway infrastructure alongside mainstream schools can re-engage young people who have disengaged from traditional settings.[51]
Valued, Loved & Safe **SDGs 5, 10, 16** CRC Arts 9, 18, 19, 34, 37, 40	**Primary - Prevention** • **Clear, welcoming school entry (not admin gatekeeping)** → lowers entry anxiety and structurally signals safety and belonging the moment a student arrives. NSW Government's environmental design guidelines for schools confirm that the design of entry points — their openness, visibility and approachability — directly shapes students' daily emotional state and sense of belonging.[52]

- **Classroom visibility + safe supervision design (no blind spots)** → deters bullying and unsafe behaviour by designing out the hidden spaces where harassment occurs. International evidence demonstrates that designing out hidden and unsupervised spaces in school environments directly reduces the incidence of bullying and harassment.[53]
- **Calm, easy-to-navigate school layouts (with noise control and clear pathways)** → keeps everyday stress levels low for all students by creating a peaceful, predictable environment. A systematic review of trauma-informed programs in Australian schools identifies calm, predictable physical environments as a foundational design principle that supports student regulation and reduces re-traumatisation.[54]
- **Inclusive, highly dignified washroom infrastructure** (floor-to-ceiling private cubicles with shared, visible washing stations) → removes a primary site of anxiety and exclusion, ensuring a fundamental biological need feels safe for all students. Victoria's Building Quality Standards Handbook for schools recognises that washroom design — including privacy and inclusivity — is a wellbeing infrastructure priority that affects every student's daily experience.[55]
- **Architecture and design that supports Pastoral House systems in large schools** → establishing clear "home-bases" prevents anonymity in massive public schools by physically breaking the campus into smaller communities ensuring students are physically anchored to a familiar geography as well as teachers and peers. Research on school size, belonging and student wellbeing confirms that breaking large schools into smaller house-based communities through architectural design reduces anonymity and improves student-teacher relationships foundational to wellbeing.[56]

Secondary - Early Intervention

- **Centralized, visible Wellbeing Hubs (informal, accessible drop-in spaces, not hidden offices)** → encourages early, informal self-referral, catching minor distress before it escalates into a clinical crisis. Victoria's Inclusive Schools Fund investment confirms that physical placement and approachability of wellbeing services directly shapes whether students choose to seek help.[57]
- **Targeted retrofitting of high-privacy, fully enclosed ablution infrastructure (gender-neutral bathrooms)** → intervenes early for cohorts experiencing severe bathroom anxiety, bullying, or gender dysphoria, preventing complete school refusal. The Kids Research Institute documents the significant relationship between accessible, gender-affirming bathroom infrastructure and school attendance among transgender and gender diverse young people.[58]

Tertiary – Response

- **Crisis response spaces (safe, supervised, low stimulus)** → immediate containment of acute distress or behaviour. Victoria's policy on restraint and seclusion recognises that dedicated crisis response infrastructure is essential for managing acute distress safely, and that absent or poorly designed spaces increase both harm and rights violations.[59]
- **Secure areas for high-risk situations)** → The student can physically execute their need to "flee" into the open air, but the architecture safely catches them, keeping them connected to the campus without punitive exclusion. NSW Government design guidelines recognise that secure therapeutic outdoor spaces — with high but visually soft boundaries attached to wellbeing hubs — create safe containment zones that support re-engagement without punitive exclusion.[60]

	• **Integrated multi-agency spaces (mental health, child protection co-location)** → enables coordinated response, not siloed referrals physically removing the barrier between education and crisis family support. The national PLACE (Providing Advice on Space and Infrastructure) framework confirms that co-located multi-agency infrastructure in school settings breaks down the systemic barriers between education, mental health and child protection.[61]
Positive Identity & Culture **SDGs 4, 10, 11** CRC Arts 7, 8, 14, 30	**Primary - Prevention** • **Cultural identity embedded in whole campus design (Designing with Country, not decoration i.e. beyond murals only)** → normalises belonging for all students. Follows protocols for indigenous-led creative practice in architecture and design project . The NSW Government Architect's Designing with Country framework and Monash University's protocols for Indigenous-led creative practice demonstrate that genuine cultural embedding in school design strengthens identity and reduces alienation.[62] • **Visible use of local language, stories, symbols** → strengthens identity early, reduces alienation revitalises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. NSW and ACT education frameworks confirm that embedding Indigenous languages and cultural symbols visibly across school campuses strengthens Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' sense of identity and connection.[63] • **Outdoor learning spaces connected to Country** → supports different ways of learning for all students. The Australian Curriculum's cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures provides the national mandate for outdoor learning spaces designed as Country-based learning environments.[64] • **Faith and reflection spaces (inclusive, multi-use wellbeing infrastructure** → Neutral, accessible spaces within schools that support prayer, reflection, sensory regulation, or temporary withdrawal for wellbeing and inclusion. The Australian Human Rights Commission confirms that schools have legal obligations to provide reasonable facilities for religious observance and reflection, underscoring the importance of inclusive, multi-use faith and wellbeing spaces.[65] • **Spaces that are designed to celebrate diversity and belonging**. → especially creates a connection to the First Nations people on whose Country the school is situated. University of Melbourne ARC research and ANTAR's Know Your Country initiative demonstrate that physical environments designed to celebrate diversity measurably improve sense of belonging for Aboriginal students and all students.[66]
	Secondary - Early Intervention • **Dedicated cultural spaces (yarning circles, community rooms)** → Purpose-built, regularly accessible spaces that allow students to reconnect with identity, peers, and trusted adults when early signs of disengagement or distress emerge. Stabilisation spaces. Safe Truth-telling spaces. The Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority confirms that yarning circles are an established, evidence-supported pedagogical and cultural space that should be embedded in school infrastructure as a permanent feature.[67] • **Routine curriculum activation of cultural spaces (embedded, not occasional)** → keeps cultural identity active, not tokenistic

	Tertiary – Response • **Community-led healing and recovery spaces embedded within school infrastructure** → supports students dealing with trauma or disconnection • **Spaces for Elders and cultural mentors to work with students** → rebuilds identity and belonging for those disengaged. • **Flexible culturally safe learning environments for alternative pathways within school sites** → Infrastructure that prevents exit from the system through adaptive spatial design

Young and Wise voices on school infrastructure and wellbeing

ARACY's Young and Wise roundtable program brings together young Australians to share their lived experiences of wellbeing. Across multiple sessions in 2025–26, young people consistently connected their sense of wellbeing to the physical environments of their schools. The following verbatim quotes illustrate why a holistic, infrastructure-centred approach to school design is not an abstraction — it is what young people are asking for.

— Young person (she/her), ARACY Young and Wise RRR Roundtable, 2025
"There needs to be more room for varied supports for people who are neurodivergent — ones that fit for them, rather than: 'oh, well, this is one regulation, so therefore we can't give you a support that you need to kind of get through a school day.'"

— Isabella (she/her), ARACY Young and Wise Neurodivergent Roundtable, 2026

"I went to a dozen different school settings, so very varied experiences across there. But yeah, I'd say the only setting that I could talk to any neuro affirming support would be at an alternate setting….[it was] the only place I was ever at that had a quiet space where you were allowed to go, leave the classroom if you needed to — no mainstream school would ever allow that."

— Zinny, ARACY Young and Wise Neurodivergent Roundtable, 2026

"I put bullying up the top again. Just because I feel like, especially being queer and openly queer in all of the school spaces that I have — I definitely think it's more prone to direct and indirect bullying. So I definitely think bullying needs to be tackled more, especially for queer people."

— Aspen (he/him), ARACY Young and Wise LGBTQIA+ Roundtable (under-18), 2025

"Something that has been absolutely excellent at my school is that we have managed to set up quite a large Pride Club that meets every week — especially if they are in friend groups where they are the only queer person, it's a place where they can come in and be just with their community, which is really lovely."

— Beau (they/them), ARACY Young and Wise LGBTQIA+ Roundtable (under-18), 2025

"I put the clubs and groups as one of my highest, because at my school there are actually lots of different clubs catering to different interests — and that is

> *definitely one of the ways that I've found people that I can hang out with, and people who exist in similar spaces to me."*
>
> — Young person (she/her), ARACY Young and Wise RRR Roundtable (under-18), 2025

This submission recommends that infrastructure funding should have quarantined funding to construct purpose-built mental health infrastructure in every Australian public school. This should include accessible wellbeing hubs with drop-in spaces, private counselling rooms designed to eliminate stigma, early identification and screening rooms, on-site clinical spaces for visiting allied health professionals, and dedicated staff wellbeing areas. This recommendation responds directly to young people's calls to remove the 'walk of shame' that prevents help-seeking.

In the United States approximately 3,900 health services are co-located on school grounds.[68] Evaluations show reduced emergency department visits, improved graduation rates and measurable equity effects for students from low-income families. In Victoria The Doctors in Secondary Schools (DiSS) program provides youth-friendly primary healthcare services to 100 Victorian government secondary schools. A General Practitioner (GP) and Practice Nurse (PN) offer student consultations in modern, fit-for-purpose consulting rooms in schools, up to one day per week during the school term. DiSS complements existing student wellbeing programs aimed at improving health literacy and focusing on preventive health. This campaign an opportunity to build one.

The Healthy domain deserves particular attention. Mental health promotion, early intervention and crisis response each require different infrastructure. A school that only provides a counselling room (tertiary) without designing environments that promote regulation and connection for everyone (primary) will always face overwhelming demand. Young people understand this instinctively.

> *"No one knows what the students need more than themselves, listen to us."*[69]
>
> — Prevention United Youth Ambassador (Sweeney et al. 2025, p. 10)

The Valued, Loved and Safe domain raises a critical infrastructure issue. Young people have identified that the physical layout of support services can itself create stigma. When a student must walk past classmates to reach a counsellor's office, the physical environment becomes a barrier to help-seeking.

> *"Small changes, such as removing the 'walk of shame' to the counsellor's office, or creating drop-in mental health spaces in schools, can make a powerful difference in normalising help-seeking behaviours."*[70]
>
> — Prevention United Youth Ambassador (Sweeney et al. 2025, p. 14)

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model reminds us that staff wellbeing is not separate from student wellbeing. Teachers who have no private space of their own, who work in deteriorating buildings, who lack access to natural light and green space — these conditions directly shape their capacity to support the children in their care. The domain table above therefore includes staff-facing infrastructure alongside student-facing infrastructure.

> *"Meaningful change starts with people who genuinely care. When teachers are truly invested in our wellbeing, they create space for vulnerable, sensitive conversations to begin. That connection makes all the difference."*[71]

— Prevention United Youth Ambassador (Sweeney et al. 2025, p. 14)

3. Schools as community hubs

Schools do not exist in isolation. In Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, the school sits within a community. When school infrastructure is designed to serve only classroom teaching, it misses the opportunity to support the families, health services and community organisations that surround the child.

ARACY and the Queensland Kids Partnership (QKP) have developed a national Child and Family Hubs Framework that provides a model for school-based community infrastructure.[72]

The Yarrabilba State School and Family and Community Place in South East Queensland demonstrates this approach in practice. The school was purpose-built with integrated family and community services on site, including maternal and child health, playgroup, family support and community meeting spaces.[73]

International evidence supports this model. England's Sure Start programme, which co-located early childhood, health and family services in community settings, has produced long-term outcomes including reduced hospitalisations for children and improved maternal mental health, with benefits persisting 20 years after initial investment.[74]

The inquiry should consider how infrastructure standards can support schools as platforms for integrated service delivery, not just places of instruction.

4. Climate resilience in public school infrastructure

Climate change is already disrupting Australian children's education. Extreme heat, bushfires, flooding and storms are damaging school buildings, closing schools and reducing learning days.

ARACY's forthcoming Focus Report with UNICEF Australia, supported by the Minderoo Foundation documents the scale of the problem. In 2024 alone, climate-related events caused an estimated 800,000 lost learning days in the ECEC sector across Australia.[75]

One in six long daycare services and one in eight preschools were temporarily closed due to climate events in the same period.[76] These closures disproportionately affect children in regional and remote communities, where school buildings are older and less resilient.

Climate resilience is not a separate issue from student wellbeing. Through The Nest framework, climate impacts can be measured across every domain: health (heat stress, air quality), learning (lost days, disrupted concentration), material basics (damaged buildings), safety (evacuation readiness) and participation (isolation during extreme events).

There is also an opportunity to address one of the risk factors for poor mental wellbeing by supporting students and communities to take local action. Initiatives such as installing solar panels, gardening and composting are not only cost effective but can serve as a vehicle for engaging students in meaningful conversation while giving them a tangible way to shape their local environment — building a sense of agency in an uncertain world.

The inquiry's infrastructure standards must include climate resilience as a core requirement, not an optional extra. This means designing for future climate conditions, not historical averages. It means investing in passive cooling, shade, water-sensitive design, emergency shelter capacity and renewable energy with battery storage.

For First Nations communities, climate resilience planning must be led by and designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, drawing on tens of thousands of years of land management knowledge.

5. CASE STUDY: Healthy School Food Infrastructure: Building Equity in Low SES School Communities

Australian schools do more than educate children, they support health, belonging, learning, sustainability and community connection, and our current approach is not working in either academic attainment of wellbeing outcomes. Just as schools require classrooms for learning and playgrounds for physical activity, they increasingly require food infrastructure that enables every child to access healthy, nutritious meals during the school day.

A school kitchen is not simply a catering facility. It is a piece of social infrastructure that supports children's development, strengthens local food systems, creates opportunities for community participation and helps build healthier futures. The below case study has low SES Schools as a priority but with the broader goal of universal adoption.

Strengthening Local Food Systems

School food infrastructure can become a cornerstone of healthier and more sustainable local economies.

The Healthy Lunch Kitchen developed by Health Futures Australia demonstrates how schools can become part of a circular food economy that connects local producers, seasonal produce, healthy meals and community wellbeing. Rather than relying on highly processed foods transported long distances, school kitchens can create stable demand for fresh local produce while supporting regional jobs and reducing environmental impacts.

Where possible, school meal programs should:

- Prioritise fresh, nutritious foods consistent with dietary guidelines
- Source food from local and regional producers
- Minimise single-use packaging and food waste
- Incorporate composting, kitchen gardens and food literacy programs
- Create pathways for local employment and training

This allows school infrastructure to support children's wellbeing while also strengthening community resilience and environmental sustainability.

Add a community voice and co-design element
Successful food infrastructure is built with communities, not simply delivered to them. Health Futures Australia's work with remote Indigenous Parents Australia, highlights the importance of elevating community voice in shaping the conditions that support health and wellbeing. School food programs are most effective when families, students, local producers and communities help shape how they operate and what they provide

Moving All Domains of The Nest at the Same Time

Free, nutritious and sustainable school lunches are among the few policy levers that move all six domains of The Nest simultaneously. No other single infrastructure investment in this submission generates this breadth of measurable wellbeing returns:

Nest Domain	Benefits of Infrastructure for free school lunches
Healthy **SDGs 2, 3, 6** CRC Arts 24, 33, 39	• Daily nutritious meals address what Reinventing Australian Schools (MCRI/University of Melbourne, 2023) identifies as a critical gap: 95 per cent of Australian children do not meet recommended daily vegetable intake. • Stress, anxiety and depression associated with food insecurity alleviated and stigma avoided
Learning **SDGs 4, 8, 9** CRC Arts 17, 28, 29	• Children who are hungry cannot learn. Children with health and developmental needs at school entry are more likely to have poor literacy by Grade 3. • Removing hunger as a daily barrier is an education infrastructure investment. Students can also informally learn at lunch valuable life skills about food production and preparation.
Material Basics **SDGs 1, 2, 6, 7, 11** CRC Arts 26, 27	• Guaranteed daily nutrition regardless of household income directly addresses food insecurity. • Over 1.2 million Australian children went hungry in 2020 (Foodbank, 2021). • This infrastructure changes that for every child who walks through the school gate.
Participating **SDGs 10, 16, 17** CRC Arts 12, 13, 15, 31	• Three in ten Australian 15-year-olds report not feeling that they belong at school. In PISA 2022, 18% reported feeling lonely at school and 21% reported feeling like an outsider or left out. • Shared mealtimes create daily conditions for social inclusion, a moment of belonging. • The practice of communal eating as a class can be unifying and promote participation in conversations.
Valued, Loved & Safe **SDGs 5, 10, 16** CRC Arts 9, 18, 19, 34, 37, 40	• Every child receives the same meal without a means test. • Dignity is designed into the system. • No child carries the shame of an empty lunchbox. • No family's poverty is visible at the servery. • The school's natural environment benefits from the sustainability of the program, reducing lunchbox packaging waste produced.
Positive Identity & Culture **SDGs 4, 10, 11** CRC Arts 7, 8, 14, 30	• School kitchens and dining rooms can become places where culture is shared, celebrated and strengthened. • Menus can reflect the diversity of local communities, while partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations can support the inclusion of local food knowledge, food growing practices and cultural food traditions. • This creates opportunities for children to see their identities reflected in everyday school life through food which is a cornerstone of Australia's multicultural society. This is how we can create authentic, cultural safe schools in practice.

A Three-Level Public Health Intervention

Free, nutritious and sustainable school lunches operate simultaneously at all three levels of public health intervention. This is what makes the infrastructure case so compelling. A single capital investment generates returns at every tier of prevention:

Primary prevention (universal). Every child in the low SES school receives a nutritious meal, every school day. No referral. No stigma. No opt-in. This is the largest universal health intervention a school can deliver. The kitchen serves the whole community, not just those in crisis, establishing the rituals of a shared meal and the social connection that comes from eating together. It also models everyday customs, like using familiar and unfamiliar utensils and place settings, offering valuable upskilling for children who may have had limited exposure to such routines.

Secondary prevention (early intervention). The kitchen and dining program creates structured daily contact between staff and students. This is a built-in early identification mechanism. A child who consistently refuses food, arrives without having eaten or shows signs of fatigue may be noticed sooner. The mealtime is a welfare check embedded in the school day — without requiring a referral system.

Tertiary prevention (restorative). For children already experiencing food insecurity, domestic instability or neglect, a guaranteed school meal may be the only reliable nutrition in their day. The infrastructure provides a floor of stability that makes all other therapeutic and case management interventions more effective. You cannot counsel a hungry child.

Building Conditions for Children to Thrive across a child-centred ecological system

Children thrive when they receive direct daily nutrition. Improved concentration. Reduced hunger-related behavioural incidents. Greater confidence at the servery and in the classroom. Social connection at the lunch table. A school day that starts and finishes with a basic need met.

Families thrive with reduced household food costs — real, immediate financial relief for families in low-SES communities. Reduced parental anxiety about whether their child has eaten. Healthy eating modelled at school flowing back into the home. Stronger family trust in school as an institution that genuinely cares for the whole child.

Communities thrive when the kitchen creates local employment. Sources food from local food suppliers and farms, building economic resilience in low-SES communities. The school becomes a genuine community hub. Volunteer and partnership opportunities emerge naturally from the daily operation of a food service. This is the Mooroopna Park Primary School model — where a free food program transformed behaviour, attendance and community connection — at scale.

Systems thrive with reduced long-run costs to the health system through preventative nutrition. Reduced demand on food relief services. Improved school attendance, engagement and academic outcomes reducing the need for costly remedial education. Reduced child protection risk in food-insecure households. O'Connell (2025) documents that Australia's late intervention spending is growing at 7.7 per cent per annum — more than twice the inflation rate. School lunch infrastructure is an upstream investment that directly offsets that downstream cost. Every dollar spent on a kitchen is a dollar not spent on a crisis.

Infrastructure Required

Delivering universal healthy school meal programs requires investment in core food infrastructure. This includes:

- **Commercial kitchen facilities** capable of preparing meals at whole-school scale
- **Food storage and refrigeration infrastructure** for safe handling of fresh and bulk ingredients
- **Accessible dining and food service areas** that enable all students to eat together with dignity
- **Delivery, loading and waste management infrastructure** to support efficient operations
- **Utilities and building upgrades**, including power, water and cooking infrastructure where required
- **Staff facilities, sanitation systems and food safety infrastructure** compliant with workplace and public health standards
- **Universal accessibility measures** to ensure all students and staff can access kitchen, dining and food service facilities

Together, these elements create the minimum infrastructure required to deliver safe, nutritious and sustainable school meal programs at scale.

The schools Australia builds today will shape the wellbeing of future generations. School food infrastructure offers a rare opportunity to improve health, learning, belonging, sustainability and community resilience through a single investment. Future-ready schools will not simply teach children about healthy lives – they will be designed to help children live them every day.

6. Recommendations

ARACY and Prevention United recommend that the Schools for Our Future inquiry:

Recommendation 1: Adopt The Nest as the national measurement framework for school infrastructure

This provides a consistent, evidence-based framework that every state and territory can use to assess, compare and improve school environments across six measurable wellbeing domains. Various Federal, State, Territory and local Governments are already familiar with or actively use The Nest framework.

Recommendation 2: Require infrastructure audits against all six Nest domains

Mandate that every public-school infrastructure audit reports against all six domains of The Nest to ensure the holistic wellbeing of students is being measured. Current audits focus narrowly on physical condition. Reporting should explicitly incorporate the Keyes Dual Continua Model, shifting audits from tracking deficits to measuring whether layout, lighting, and communal spatial design actively elevate students from languishing to flourishing. An audit based on The Nest would also capture whether the school environment supports health, safety, belonging, participation and cultural identity. Reporting should reflect that wellbeing runs from languishing to flourishing — not just the presence or absence of crisis — so audits measure whether spaces help every student move toward flourishing.

Recommendation 3: Apply a public health approach to infrastructure planning

Structure infrastructure investment across primary (universal), secondary (early intervention) and tertiary (response) tiers. Prioritise primary prevention infrastructure — the green spaces, ventilation, natural light and welcoming environments that promote wellbeing for *all* students and staff — alongside targeted and crisis-response spaces.

Recommendation 4: Prioritise First Nations infrastructure needs

Ensure infrastructure planning for schools serving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is led by and designed with First Nations peoples. Include culturally safe spaces, yarning circles, outdoor learning areas and infrastructure that supports different ways of learning.

The gap is measurable. In 2021, the Year 12 attainment rate for non-Indigenous Australians aged 20–24 was 91%, compared with 68% for Indigenous Australians[77]. Culturally safe, well-designed environments — led by and designed with First Nations peoples — are part of closing it.

Recommendation 5: Design schools as community hubs

Include community hub infrastructure in new school builds, using the ARACY/QKP Child and Family Hubs Framework. Co-locate family services, health services and community spaces on school sites to strengthen the ecological systems that surround the child.

Recommendation 6: Embed climate resilience in infrastructure standards

Require all new school builds and major upgrades to meet climate resilience standards based on future climate projections, not historical averages. Include passive cooling, shade, water-sensitive design, emergency shelter capacity and renewable energy with battery storage.

Recommendation 7: Recognise staff wellbeing as a precondition for student wellbeing

Include staff-facing infrastructure in all school infrastructure standards, recognising that Bronfenbrenner's ecological model applies equally to the adults who surround the child. This means private staff spaces, teacher wellbeing rooms and adequate professional learning environments.

Recommendation 8: Build purpose-built mental health infrastructure in every public school

Fund and construct dedicated health and mental wellbeing infrastructure across all Australian public campuses. To optimize help-seeking behaviour among young people, architectural standards must prioritize discreet physical access and high-privacy spatial layout. Rather than isolating crisis-intervention or counselling spaces in high-visibility, heavily trafficked administration zones—which inadvertently creates a visible psychological barrier to care—funding should be quarantined for centrally located, multi-functional 'Soft-Entry' Wellbeing Hubs. These spaces must blend universal, drop-in communal areas with highly soundproofed, private allied health clinical spaces. This structural approach normalizes student support, ensures equitable access, and physically removes spatial triggers of stigma from the campus footprint.

Recommendation 9: Invest in healthy and sustainable school food infrastructure

Fund healthy food infrastructure in schools serving communities experiencing disadvantage, including commercial kitchens, dining facilities, food storage and waste management systems that support universal healthy school meal programs.
School food infrastructure should prioritise nutritious meals, environmentally sustainable operations and procurement from local and regional producers wherever possible, recognising that access to healthy food especially through initiatives like free school lunches requires considerable infrastructure but can improve all domains of student wellbeing simultaneously.

7. Conclusion

Australia's public schools at any one time can host 2.7 million students. More importantly, the experiences that students have in those environments establish many of the foundations for later life. The importance of those experiences, in particular the role of the build in environment cannot therefore be overstated. The buildings in which they learn shape their health, their safety, their sense of belonging and their capacity to thrive. Yet there is no national standard for measuring whether school infrastructure supports these outcomes nor commensurate funding mechanisms to meet minimum standards let alone those that would optimise outcomes for students and school communities more broadly.

The Nest provides a ready-made solution. It is an existing, tested framework that maps every aspect of school infrastructure to measurable child and youth wellbeing outcomes. Combined with a public health approach that structures investment across primary, secondary and tertiary prevention, The Nest can give Australia a national language for school infrastructure that centres the child.

ARACY and Prevention United urge the inquiry to adopt this framework. The physical environments we build for children today will shape their outcomes for decades to come.

Endnotes

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