

Achieving Better and Fairer Schools

The case for full-service school models in Australia

The Mitchell Institute, Victoria University

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Acknowledgement of Country



The Mitchell Institute at Victoria University acknowledges, recognises and respects the Ancestors, Elders and families of the Bunurong/Boonwurrung, Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri/Woiwurrung of the Kulin who are the traditional owners of University land in Victoria, the Gadigal and Guring-gai of the Eora Nation who are the traditional owners of University land in Sydney, and the Yulara/Yugarapul people and Turrbal people living in Meanjin (Brisbane).

About the Mitchell Institute

Established in 2013, the Mitchell Institute at Victoria University is a leading policy think tank and research centre. With a focus on education policy, systems and place, we are working towards a fairer and more productive society where every individual, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to thrive.

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Key points

Educational inequality remains one of the most pressing challenges facing Australia today. Despite decades of reform and unprecedented investment, the gap between students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds is widening.

Full-service school models – where education, health and social supports are integrated within schools – are one way to address the complex needs that impact student learning, particularly in high-need communities.

Educational inequality is growing – gaps in achievement, attendance, and wellbeing are widening. The learning gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students now equates to more than five years by Year 9.

Traditional schools are not equipped to meet this challenge – students experiencing disadvantage can have complex needs related to barriers outside the classroom like poverty, poor health and unstable housing.

Full-service schools integrate wraparound supports – embedding health, wellbeing and family services into the core of school operations can support the right conditions for learning.

Evidence shows full-service schools are cost effective – successful full-service school models lead to improved attendance, engagement, wellbeing and learning.

Policy momentum exists to take this forward now – the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025–2034)* provides a unique opportunity to pursue this model, providing additional funding and encouraging wellbeing and engagement reforms.

Success depends on sustained investment – effective full-service school models require dedicated coordinators, long-term funding, co-design with community and broad impact measures to avoid fragmentation.

A framework is needed for coherent delivery – all states and territories should develop a framework that defines the purpose, principles and delivery architecture for full-service schools, ensuring consistency while allowing local adaptation.

Overview

Socioeconomic status — reflecting differences in income, education and occupation — is a powerful predictor of educational outcomes. Despite significant investments in school funding and wellbeing initiatives, the education system is still not reaching all students equally.

Educational inequality is persistent and multi-dimensional, driven by factors that extend well beyond the classroom. Children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, First Nations students, students with disability, and those living in rural or remote communities face greater barriers to engagement, wellbeing, and learning, and these challenges tend to intensify over time.

Support services for children and families are frequently fragmented, variable in scope and dependent on local capacity. Schools are commonly left to respond to complex needs without the right supports.

Reforms focused on pedagogy, curriculum and assessment remain vital to improving teaching and learning. However, they cannot fully address the broader inequities that influence students' capacity to learn, engage and thrive.

Evidence from Australia and internationally suggests that strategically coordinated supports delivered at the school level can strengthen student engagement, reduce barriers to participation and promote improved learning trajectories. These findings coincide with a growing acknowledgement that wellbeing is foundational to learning, and that policy responses must recognise the wider conditions shaping children's development.

Full-service schools offer a practical reform approach that aligns education with health and social services, supporting students to arrive ready to learn and freeing up teachers to focus on teaching.



The policy challenge

Australian schools are a highly contested space, shaped by competing views about what governments should prioritise for reform. Election cycles and public debate tend to focus on what is taught in classrooms, the quality of teaching, and student outcomes, yet these issues address only part of the challenge.

Despite record investment in schooling over the past decade, large and persistent inequities remain.

For children experiencing the most disadvantage, the latest Australian Early Development Census shows that about **three in ten** start school developmentally vulnerable in at least one area of learning or development, and **one in five** are vulnerable across multiple areas (Australian Government Department of Education, 2025). Students in the most disadvantaged communities are, on average, more than **three years behind** their peers by Year 9 in literacy and numeracy skills (de Bruin et al., 2023). They are also almost **three times** more likely to miss school for more than three consecutive months (OECD, 2022).

These pressures are most acute in high-need communities, where teachers are expected to respond to complex health, wellbeing and social needs that sit beyond the remit of classroom interventions alone.

Students in some high-needs communities face multiple, compounding barriers: poorer health, food insecurity, unstable housing and limited access to early and ongoing supports. These foundational issues may contribute directly to rising absenteeism, disengagement and widening achievement gaps.

Across multiple national indicators, divides in Australia are persistent and growing. Our analysis of data on student progress and outcomes highlights deeply concerning disparities in student achievement, engagement, and health and wellbeing outcomes.

Widening achievement gaps

The learning gap between high- and low- socioeconomic status (SES) students now equates to **more than five years of progress by Year 9**. This demonstrates how gaps that emerge early – as shown in the Mitchell Institute report, *Unequal from the start: The achievement gap and the early years* (Tham et al., 2025) – widen over time and are difficult to overcome within traditional models of schooling.

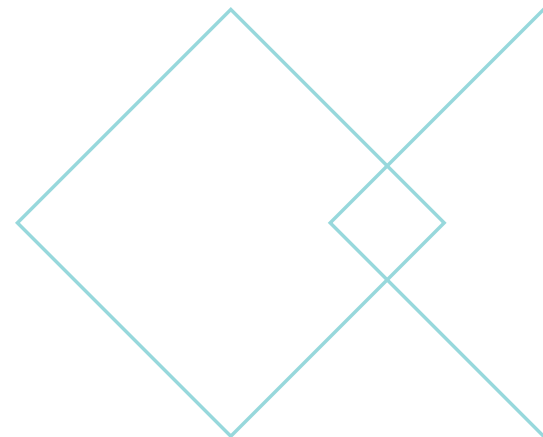
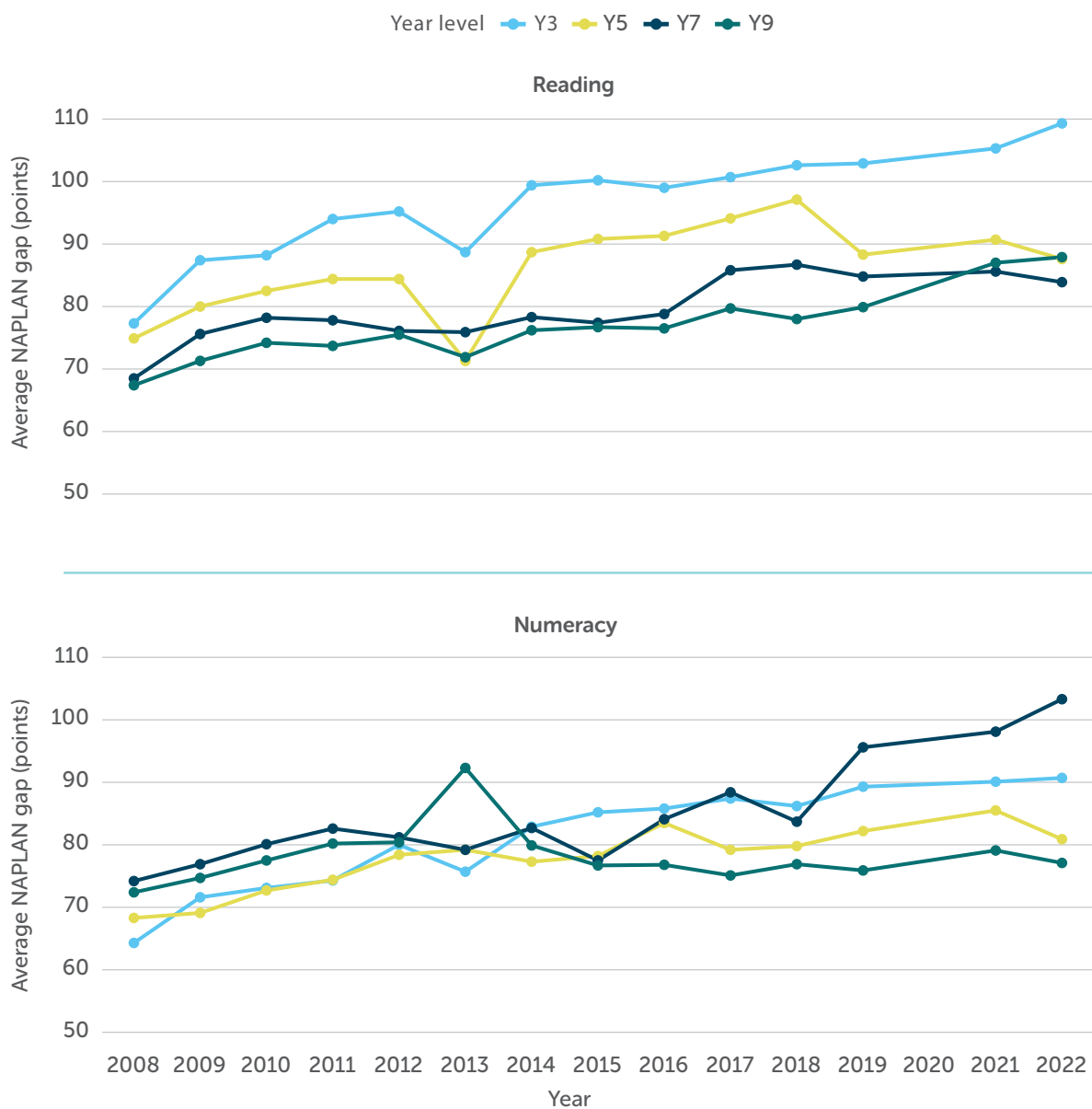


Figure 1: NAPLAN Reading and Numeracy gap by parental education (Bachelor degree or above vs Year 11 or below) between 2008 and 2022

This figure demonstrates how achievement gaps between students whose parents have a bachelor degree versus Year 11 or below widen dramatically across Years 3, 5, 7, and 9.



Source: ACARA (2025).

Note: 2020 NAPLAN data missing as it was not administered during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Crisis in engagement and attendance

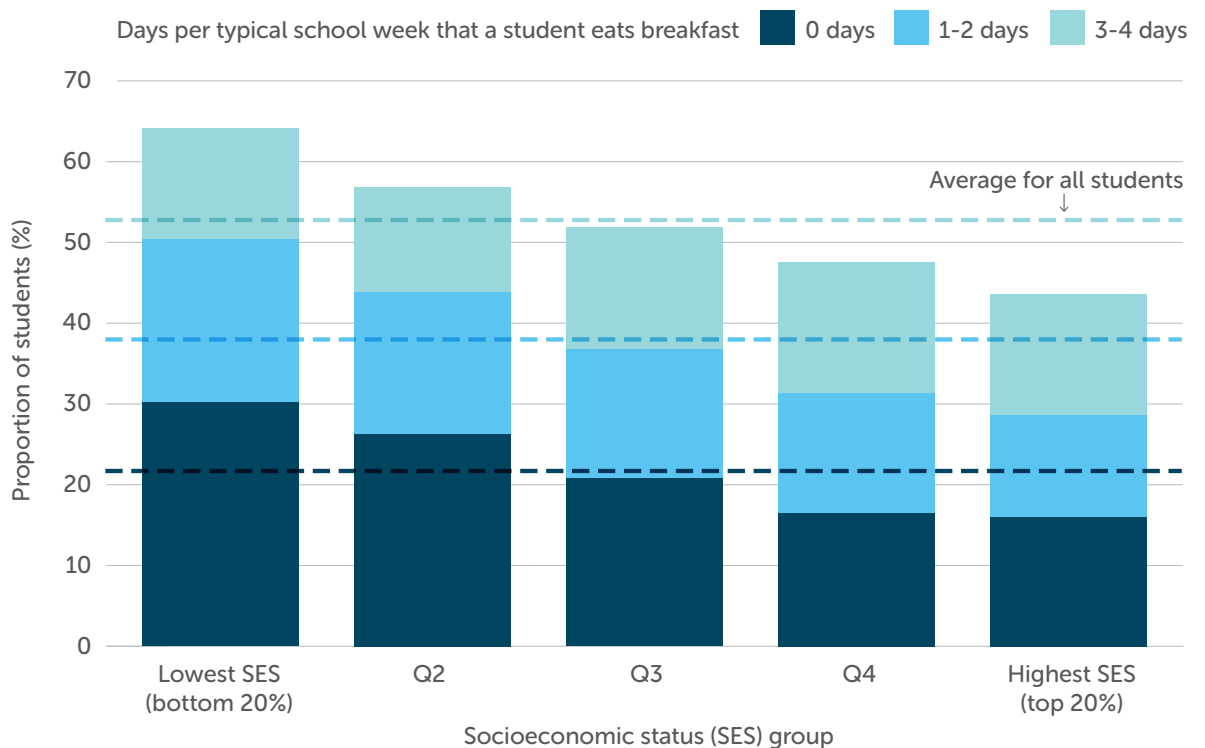
In 2024, the average attendance rate of students in Australia's most disadvantaged schools was **9.9 percentage points lower than for students in the most advantaged schools** (81.6% compared with 91.5%), up from a 6.6 percentage points gap in 2018 (87.6% compared with 94.2% in 2018).

Unmet basic needs

Around **one in three students from a low-SES backgrounds skip breakfast** before school, compared with one in six from high SES families. Students who are not eating breakfast regularly may have less capacity to focus, connect and thrive in the classroom.

Figure 2: Days per week that students eat breakfast before going to school during a typical school week, by SES quintiles (%)

This figure illustrates days per week that students eat breakfast before school, broken down by socioeconomic quintile, highlighting how basic needs like nutrition vary by SES and affect readiness to learn.



Source: PISA 2022 (OECD, 2022)



Multi-dimensional barriers

Socially disadvantaged students are almost **three times more likely** than their advantaged peers to miss school for long periods. Reasons for missing school for three or more months reveal complex barriers, including illness, family caring responsibilities, and lack of safety at school. The findings indicate that student absences often reflect life circumstances beyond the classroom, rather than a lack of interest.

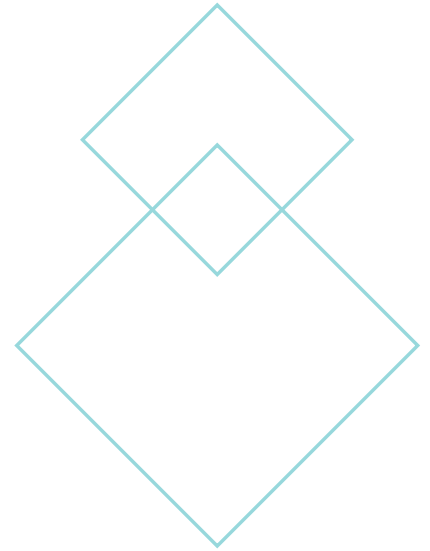
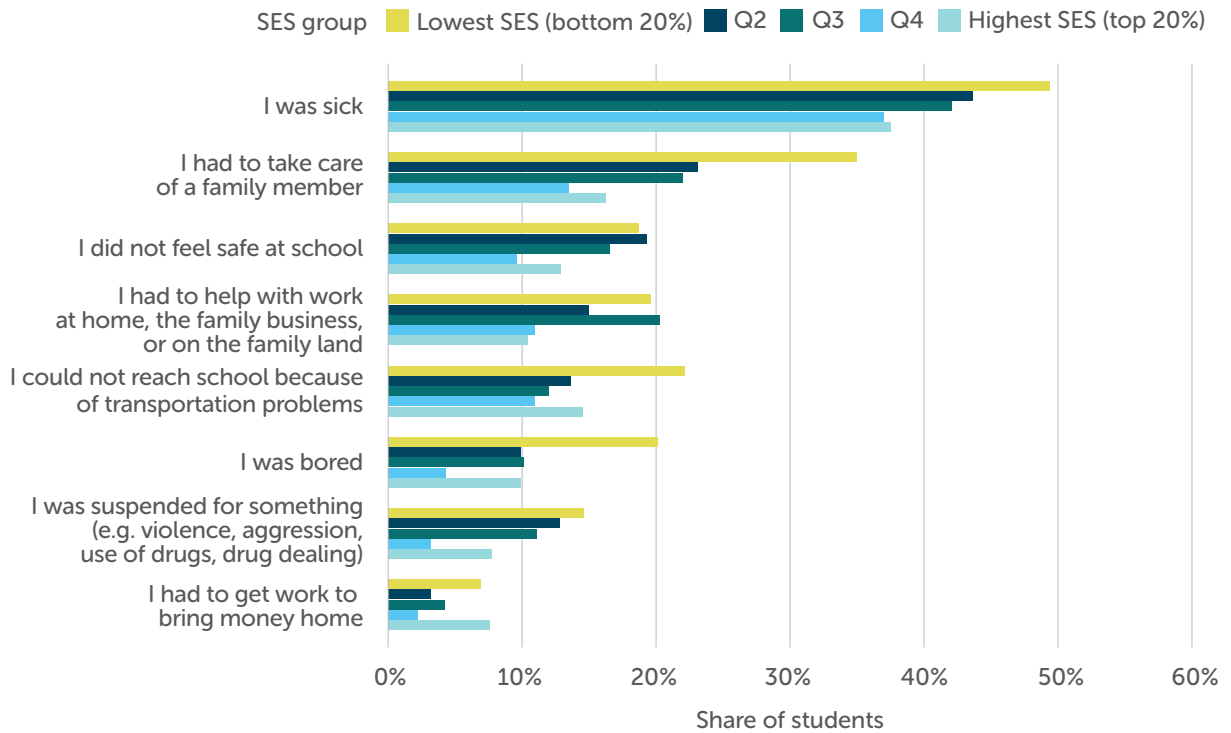


Figure 3: Reasons for missing school for three or more months in a row, by SES quintiles (%)

This figure reveals the complex barriers to attendance - including illness, caring responsibilities, and lack of safety - for students who missed school for three or more months, broken down by SES quintile.



Source: PISA 2022 (OECD, 2022).

These issues are exacerbated by high levels of socioeconomic segregation across Australian schools, which concentrate disadvantage and place greater pressure on some schools over others.

Isolated program responses – small pilots, wellbeing grants or one-off supports – have had limited impact because they do not systemically address the great differences in students' learning conditions and contexts.

A different approach is needed to address the growing inequities in student engagement, wellbeing and achievement. Our analysis points to full-service school models as a purpose-built solution – designed to integrate education, health and social supports so that all children have the opportunity to thrive.

Students who fall behind in school and struggle to achieve, tend to have poor school attendance, they are less likely to complete secondary school, undertake post-school studies, benefit from good employment opportunities and their earning potential is diminished (Lamb et al., 2020).



What are full-service schools?

Successful full-service school models share a common purpose: to strengthen students' sense of engagement, belonging and readiness to learn. While no two schools are the same, the evidence shows that effective models support the whole child – educationally, physically, socially and emotionally – and place the student at the centre of every partnership.

These models are built on **four key principles** that set them apart from traditional school delivery. Services are integrated into the school's operations to remove barriers to learning, tailored to local needs and strengths and developed in collaboration with families and community partners to ensure support reaches students where it matters most.



Holistic focus

Support for the whole child – academic, physical, mental and social – is central.



Integration at the core

Extended services are embedded in the school's operations – not just co-located – and locally coordinated to strengthen students' engagement with school and learning.



Place-based tailoring

Services respond to the needs and assets of each school community – no single, standardised model.



Reaching in to reach out

Family and community are collaborators in the planning and delivery of appropriate services, but students remain the central focus.



Full-service schools aim to **redefine the culture and operation of schooling** so that improving student engagement, health and wellbeing is valued as highly as academic learning. They provide additional learning, health and wellbeing supports to remove the barriers that some students face to attend, engage and learn in schools.

Examples of additional services include:

- long day care
- dental services
- breakfast/lunch programs
- community education courses and/or community access to school facilities.

Not like traditional schools or community hubs

Full-Service Schools go beyond co-location and the limits of traditional school delivery. They are not community hubs that share space with schools, and they are not schools expected to address complex challenges through classroom practice alone. Instead, every partnership and service is designed to strengthen students' engagement and connection to learning. Health and wellbeing supports are integrated into the school's operations to remove barriers to attendance and participation, while involving families as partners in their child's learning journey.

Some services target student learning (mentoring, tutoring, extended academic activities, specialist clubs), others target engagement and wellbeing (parenting support and family learning, meal programs, mental health and wellbeing services).

The aim is not to take the focus from teaching and learning, but to create the conditions in which teaching and learning can flourish.

Full-service school models are also specifically designed to **support the work of teachers**, recognising that they should not be expected to resolve every issue alone.

Teachers are often the first to identify when a student or family is in need and many already go above and beyond to support them through challenging life circumstances.

The full-service school model does not add to the demands placed on teachers; by integrating wraparound services, it acknowledges that addressing complex student needs requires a shared, multidisciplinary approach, and enables teachers to focus more fully on teaching and learning.

Every disadvantaged school holds the potential to evolve into a full-service school—creating meaningful benefits for students, families, and the wider community. Over time, the initiative could expand to include schools across metropolitan, regional and rural areas, supporting a phased and inclusive implementation that strengthens reach and impact.

Who are full-service schools for?

Our analysis of student engagement and learning outcomes shows that inequality is worsening, and evidence suggests that the greatest challenges are found in schools serving communities experiencing concentrated poverty and higher levels of need.

Schools working primarily with disadvantaged student cohorts require additional support. Too often, they have not been equipped or resourced to provide students and their families with the range of academic and non-academic supports needed to help level the playing field.

Internationally, full-service school models are commonly first introduced in communities facing greater social and economic disadvantage - where the need for integrated supports is most acute. Schools in these contexts serve students with complex needs and benefit most from access to extended services. Over time, such models strengthen the ecosystem around children and young people, contributing to healthier and more resilient communities.

Who do they benefit?



Students benefit academically and emotionally because barriers to learning—such as hunger, trauma, or untreated health issues—are reduced through health and wellbeing supports, so they can attend school more regularly and engage and focus more fully on learning.



Families gain easier access to services like counselling, healthcare, employment assistance, and parenting programs, which may improve engagement in their children's education.



Schools and teachers get the support they need to tackle complex and multifaceted social, health or wellbeing issues, relieving teachers from being the primary responders. Wrap-around services create school environments more conducive to teaching and learning.



Disadvantaged communities benefit, as schools become safe, trusted spaces for support, connection and collaboration, helping to ensure that vulnerable members of our community don't fall through the cracks.

Learning from established models

International success

International evidence demonstrates that integrated school-community models improve outcomes.

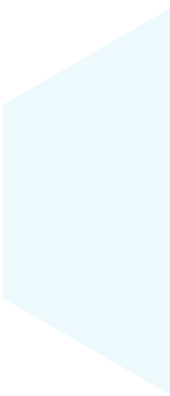
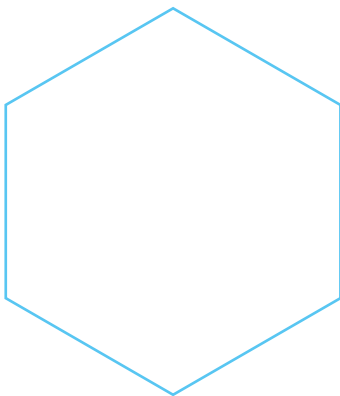
In the U.S., evaluations of California's Community Schools reforms found stronger attendance and engagement in schools with well-coordinated partnerships and multi-year funding. In New York City, more than 300 Community Schools were established between 2014 and 2019 (NYC Department of Education, 2020). An independent evaluation found significant improvements: chronic absenteeism was 7-9 percentage points lower in participating schools, suspensions declined by around 17%, and high school graduation rates were 7.2 percentage points higher. Surveys also showed stronger student sense of belonging, safer school climates, and improved relationships between pupils and adults (Johnston et al., 2020).

The U.K.'s Full-Service Extended Schools initiative, launched in 2003, sought to integrate education with social inclusion, neighbourhood renewal, and the *Every Child Matters* agenda. Led by the Department for Education and Skills, the

program aimed for every local authority to establish at least one school offering extended services such as childcare, health and social care access, adult learning, and community activities.

By its conclusion, 138 schools – mostly in disadvantaged areas – participated, many located within Behaviour Improvement Programme zones (Cummings et al., 2007). Schools adopting holistic approaches saw measurable improvements in student attainment, engagement, and behaviour, with smaller achievement gaps for disadvantaged students. Benefits extended to families and communities, improving access to health and social supports and strengthening schools' roles as community hubs.

These examples demonstrate that integrated school-community models can be scaled and sustained when backed by strong policy with clear purpose and defined roles. They also need dedicated multi-year funding, cross sector partnerships that bring schools and other service agencies together and evaluation systems that track impact on learning and wellbeing.



Australian potential

Across Australia, states and territories are taking divergent approaches to connecting schools with non-school services to support student wellbeing and learning.

Western Australia remains the only state to have formally committed to establishing full-service schools in four sites (including one in an outer regional or remote area), while the Australian Capital Territory plans to design, trial, and implement a community school model.

Other states have embedded related reforms through different mechanisms - for example, wellbeing coordinators in New South Wales, student wellbeing officers in the Northern Territory, increased access to healthcare professionals in Queensland, and targeted wellbeing and engagement initiatives in South Australia and Tasmania. Victoria's Community Hubs, which adopt a family-centred, place-based approach, are another example of schools providing integrated supports without adopting the full-service school model in name.

While all jurisdictions emphasise student wellbeing and the social, physical and mental health factors influencing learning, only Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory have explicitly committed to developing full-service school models. Elsewhere, reforms are progressing through fragmented or parallel initiatives, sometimes supported by non-government partners. For instance, Queensland's Family LinQ initiative, funded through philanthropy, has helped selected schools develop the infrastructure and expertise for full-service-like delivery.

However, this reliance on variable funding and local initiative underscores the absence of a cohesive national approach and highlights the uneven implementation landscape across states and territories.



Why invest in full-service schools now?

They can be effective at improving excellence and equity

Research indicates that when integrated effectively, the delivery of services that collectively support students, families, and the wider community contribute to a broad spectrum of outcomes, including:

- student academic, behavioural and social-emotional improvements
- stronger student–teacher relationships
- increased teacher satisfaction
- improved parent–teacher collaboration.

They are cost-effective

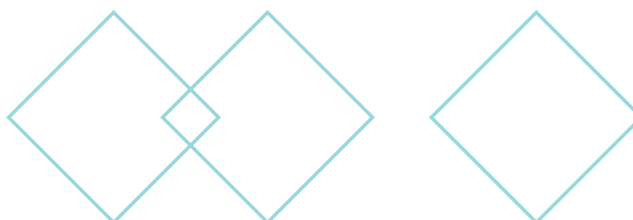
International evidence demonstrates strong returns on investment in full-service school models. For example, U.S. studies show up to **\$23 AUD in social and economic value** for every dollar invested (Maier et al, 2017). The U.K.'s Full-Service Extended Schools initiative yielded a **\$4.50 AUD return for every \$2 AUD invested**, with gains in student achievement, health, and behaviour (Cummings et al. 2007).

Other systems are already seeing the benefits

Jurisdictions like **California** and **New York** have made significant investments in full-service models, while the U.K. aimed to scale the approach nationally after successful pilots. These initiatives are backed by robust evaluations, offering valuable lessons for Australia.

We need to be bold if we want to confront inequality head on

To tackle inequality and achieve both excellence and equity, Australia must adopt bold, innovative approaches. Full-service school models offer a promising path forward. By integrating extended supports, they help schools in disadvantaged communities address complex needs and create healthier, more engaging environments for students, families and teachers alike.



From evidence to action: A toolkit for policymakers and system leaders

Our analysis brings together lessons from research and practice to guide policymakers and education system leaders in designing and implementing effective full-service school models.

We identify the **key features** that make these models work, the **barriers** that can undermine them, and the **system-level conditions** needed to embed and sustain them at scale.

What makes full-service school models effective?

International experiences consistently show that successful full-service school models share common features that allow schools and teachers to better focus on student, family and community need. Our analysis highlights **five key features** that underpin effective and sustainable full-service school models.

1. Dedicated coordination

A full-time coordinator embedded within the school leadership team ensures that principals and teachers are not burdened with managing additional partnerships. This role leads collaboration, drives an equity-focused culture, and helps embed a whole-school approach to student and family support.

2. Sustainable funding

Successful full-service schools are supported by long-term, flexible funding that combines government and philanthropic investment. Such funding enables schools to plan strategically, sustain partnerships and programs, and respond to local priorities—above and beyond core school budgets.

3. Broad impact assessment

Evaluation must capture outcomes beyond academic results, including attendance, engagement, wellbeing, family participation and school connectedness. Embedding research and practitioner inquiry within schools strengthens accountability and builds evidence of impact.

4. Co-design practice

Co-design with students, families and communities ensures services reflect genuine local needs and build on existing strengths. Needs assessments help identify priorities, foster trust, and ensure schools work in partnership with their communities—particularly those that have been marginalised or under-served.

5. Alignment

Strong alignment across government departments, agencies and community organisations reduces administrative barriers and supports cohesive service delivery within schools. Clear frameworks and agreements enable specialised professionals to work safely and effectively as part of the school ecosystem.

Together, these five features represent the essential building blocks for implementing and sustaining full-service school models that can contribute to equitable, integrated and lasting improvements in student outcomes.

Managing the risks

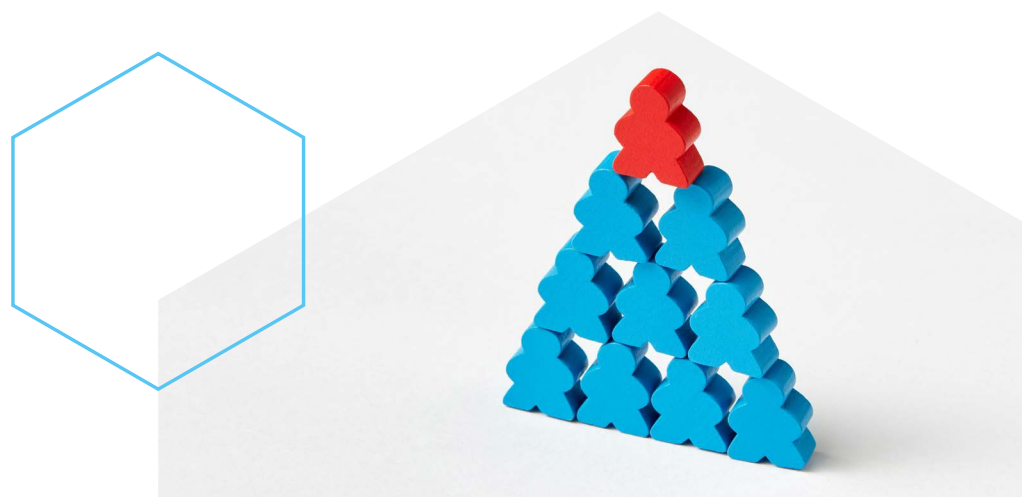
International evidence demonstrates that full-service school models can deliver measurable benefits for students, families and communities. At the same time, research also makes it clear why such models remain uncommon both in Australia and internationally.

Full-service schools are complex to establish and sustain, requiring a fundamental shift in strategy, governance and funding beyond traditional

education approaches. Structural constraints within the Australian school system, such as siloed services, short-term funding cycles, and uneven capacity across regions pose real challenges to scaling these models effectively.

The table below identifies barriers to the effective implementation of full-service school models internationally, providing valuable insights for Australian policy and system leaders.

BARRIER	IMPACT
Unsustainable funding	Services start but stop as soon as short-term funding ends; trust and partnerships are lost.
Insufficient staffing	Without coordinators or appropriate staff to deliver the extended services, the additional workload overwhelms teachers and principals.
Untargeted initiatives	Generic program designs fail to address the unique needs of each school community, reducing effectiveness.
Competing reform priorities	Schools face pressure to meet targets in other reform areas, leaving limited bandwidth. Departmental support is limited and focused on other reform agendas.
Narrow accountability metrics	Attendance, wellbeing, family engagement and other key outcomes are not valued or measured, so these reforms appear 'low priority' within the current system.



Making it happen in Australia – nationally and locally

Some of the principles underpinning full-service school models, such as a focus on student wellbeing, establishment of partnerships, a place-based approach to education and community engagement are already reflected in the strategic priorities of state and territory governments.

On the ground, many Australian schools already offer a range of learning, engagement and wellbeing supports to students and families, some through partnerships with community organisations.

Building on this foundation, our analysis has identified the **three system-level conditions** required to implement and sustain full-service school models effectively across school systems. They represent the core implementation levers identified in the evidence base to enable the full-service school features to take root, operate effectively and scale sustainably at the system level.

Together, they bridge the gap between principle and practice: turning what the evidence says works into what can be done systemically across Australia.

1. Dedicated coordination

Effective full-service school models depend on dedicated coordination to link education with health, wellbeing, and community services. This role – typically a full-time coordinator or small team within the school leadership structure – requires strong skills in partnership building,

communication, and integrated service delivery. Coordinators oversee needs assessments, referral pathways, and data-informed support strategies, ensuring that interventions are timely, culturally responsive, and aligned with student needs.

2. State and territory department-level supports

System-level backing is critical. Education departments should establish central teams to guide rollout, build infrastructure, and support collaboration between schools and external partners. These teams can facilitate needs assessments, streamline engagement processes, and formalise partnerships across health, social and community sectors. Where service capacity is limited or absent – especially in rural and remote areas – additional support structures provided centrally will be essential to implementation and delivery.

3. Locally tailored extended services

Full-service school models must be locally responsive, balancing top-down policy direction with bottom-up community engagement. Each school's mix of services should be determined through local needs assessments and designed around existing strengths, resources, and partnerships. Flexibility ensures the model works across diverse contexts – from metropolitan to remote – and builds on what schools already do well, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all approach.



The need for a framework to get us there

While local adaptation is key, the successful implementation of full-service school models requires a coherent framework for delivery that is unique to every state or territory. Such a framework will ensure that, even as schools and communities tailor services to meet the unique needs of their students and families, they remain anchored in the core principles, key features and evidence-based practices that define effective full-service school models.

To embed these conditions and translate reform ambitions into outcomes, state and territory level governments need to adopt the following coordinated actions:

Phased rollout

Implementing full-service school models requires deep, system-level change rather than a superficial program rollout. It demands strong leadership, collaboration and a cultural shift in how schools, families and services work together. This transformation takes time, dialogue, and a willingness to bridge traditional boundaries between education, health and community sectors. A phased and adaptive rollout, guided by ongoing evaluation and local feedback, is essential to ensure sustainability and responsiveness at school, community and system levels.

Alignment and collaboration across government, agencies and services

Meaningful alignment between education, health and social service systems is vital. While schools play a central coordinating role, success depends on a whole-of-government approach where all levels – local, state, and federal – work alongside community

organisations, NGOs, and philanthropic partners. Breaking down silos requires clear governance structures and shared accountability, bringing together agencies across child and family services, housing, youth, and mental health to co-design and coordinate delivery.

Sustained investment strategy

Long-term, strategic funding is a precondition for success. Rather than short-term or fragmented allocations, multi-year investment is needed to build stability, collaboration, and impact. The *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* already provides a mechanism for sustained funding to support full-service school implementation, potentially without additional resourcing. Coordinating learning, wellbeing, engagement, and health initiatives through this model can improve efficiency and coherence across existing reforms.

Monitoring and evaluation

A robust evidence base is critical for accountability and improvement. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation should accompany all phases of implementation, assessing not only academic outcomes but also wellbeing, engagement, and community impact. A dedicated research agenda centred on the voices of students, families and educators should capture lessons learned and support continuous improvement.

Together, these elements emphasise that taking a system level approach to full-service schools is a long-term, collaborative reform requiring phased implementation, cross-sector alignment, sustained investment and continuous learning.

Conclusion

Delivering on the promise of the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement*

Australia's education reform agenda is shifting toward more integrated approaches that connect learning and wellbeing. The *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* sets a national direction to lift engagement, improve attendance and close persistent gaps in opportunity. Achieving these ambitions will require stronger connections between schools and the services that support student wellbeing and participation – ensuring every child can attend, engage and succeed.

Full-service schools align directly with this vision. They offer a practical mechanism to translate national reform priorities into practice, connecting classrooms with the supports that students need. The timing could not be better. The *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* provides a platform for a shift toward integrated, place-based reforms that recognise health, engagement and wellbeing supports are essential to improving the conditions for learning.

Addressing educational inequality means moving reform **beyond the classroom**, acknowledging that broader social and health factors shape students' capacity to learn. Student wellbeing, engagement and health need to be supported by aligned services and infrastructure, so teachers are not expected to manage complex needs alone. A system level approach with shared principles, clear accountability and sustained investment is needed.

The next phase of reform must focus on the **ecosystems that support learning, wellbeing and health together**. This requires a system capable of working across boundaries, viewing education, health and wellbeing supports as part of a system of opportunity. Full-service schools provide a clear and practical pathway to achieve this: they do not add to teachers' workloads, but deliver a model that allows every student to thrive.

Embedding much-needed supports within schools offers a promising way for governments to realise the goals of the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* – ensuring that national aspirations translate into tangible outcomes for children and young Australians.



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