

Mental Health in Primary Schools

Thriving Children Thriving Communities Webinar Series

September 2026



Acknowledgement of Country





Session overview

- Introductions and setting the scene
- Victorian Department of Education
 - Alignment with frameworks and strategies
 - Support for implementation, embedding and sustainability
- MHiPS overview
 - Model, evidence, adaptation for new jurisdictions
- Perspectives from a Principal
- Perspectives from a Mental Health & Wellbeing Leader
- Panel Q&A
- Close



Panel



Deborah Maher, Director Student Mental Health,
Victorian Department of Education



Georgia Dawson, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education,
University of Melbourne
Professional Learning Lead, MHiPS



Emily Duff, Assistant Principal,
Sunbury Heights Primary School



Deanne Everett, Mental Health & Wellbeing Leader
St Francis of Assisi Primary School, Wodonga

Setting the scene

CURRENT REALITY

-  **10-20%** of children and adolescents experience mental disorders
-  **50%** of all mental illnesses begin by the age of 14
-  Can impact development, education and ability to live productive lives
-  Investment in treatment at the expense of prevention is not reducing rates of mental distress

Schools: A universal platform



BETTER OUTCOMES

-  Earlier support leads to better mental health & wellbeing
-  Increased learning & educational engagement
-  Greater ability to live healthy, productive lives
-  Reduced pressure on specialist services and waitlists

BUT...



without adequate resourcing and support, teachers are placed under increased pressure



Co-design: Issues identified by Victorian teachers

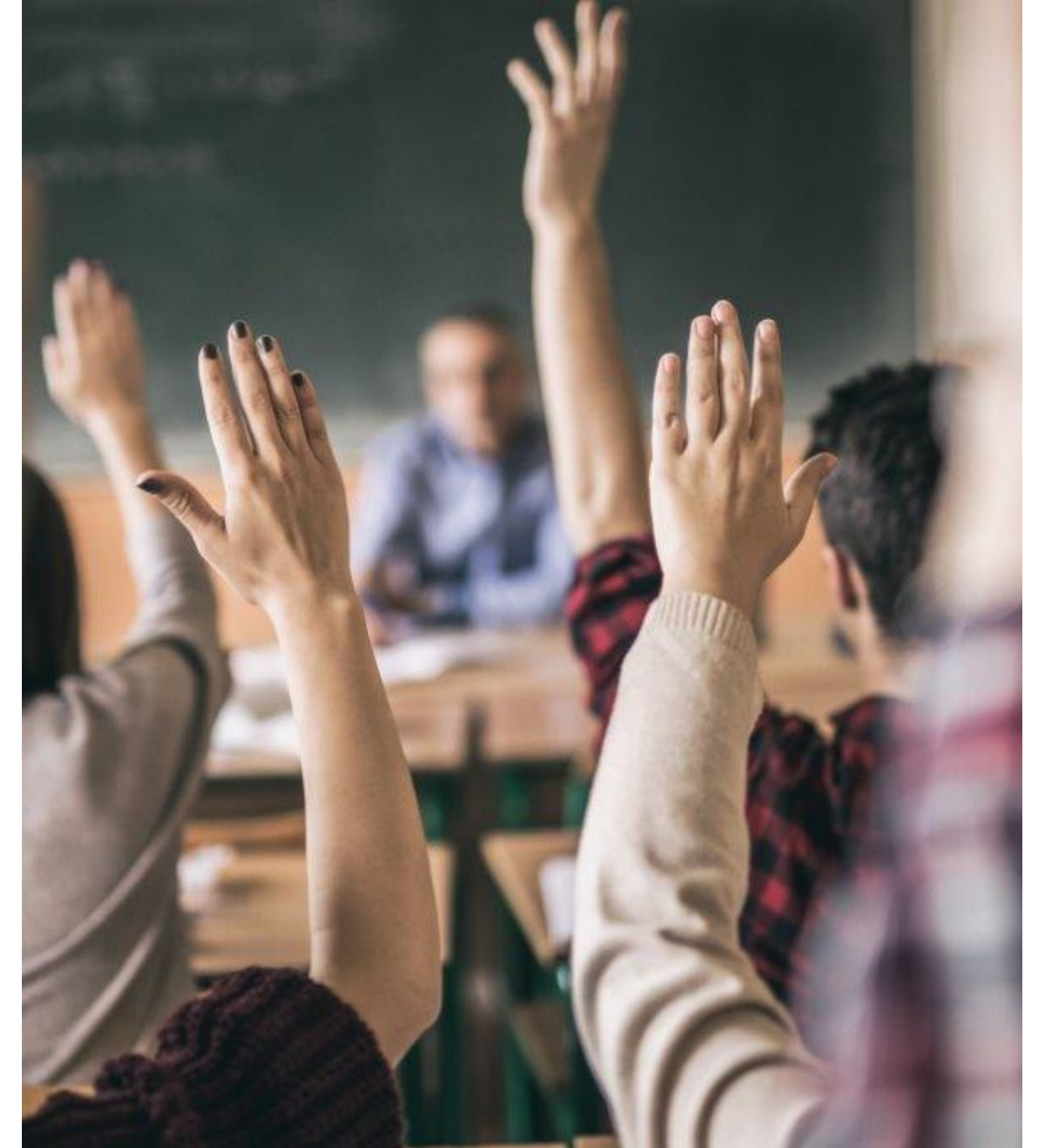
Capacity of teachers and wellbeing staff

Funding

Access to training

Availability of specialists

Family finances/lack of engagement



Co-design: Other issues identified

We found:



Teachers felt low confidence in their ability to identify and support mental health problems

However, we know:



Classroom teachers are most often the first identifier of a problem

Teachers wanted:



Practical short-term strategies they could implement confidently and not increase risk



Knowledge to act in a proactive way



Direction on building referral networks and accessing support

Co-design: Why an educator?



Embedded in
school culture

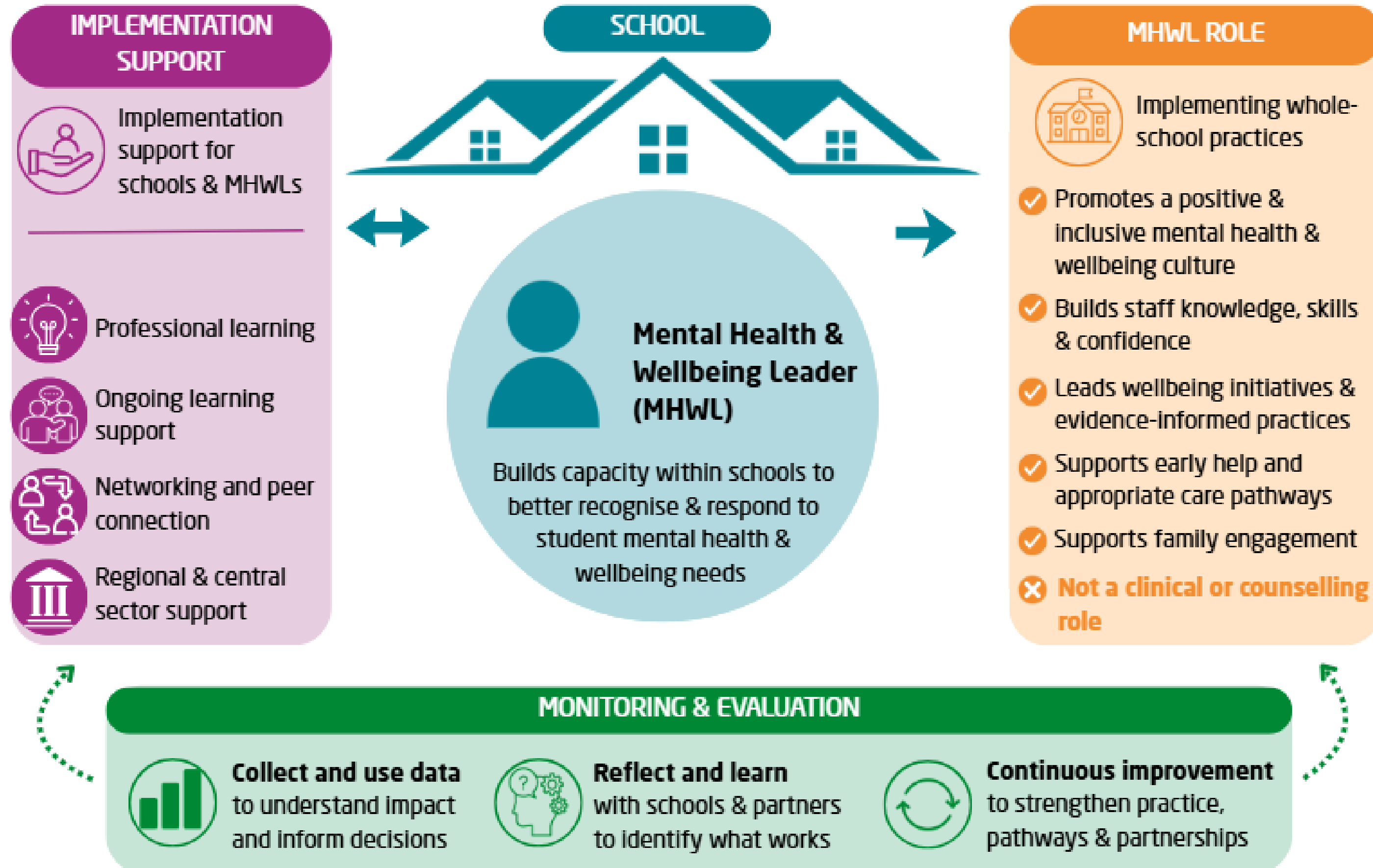


Understand how
school's work



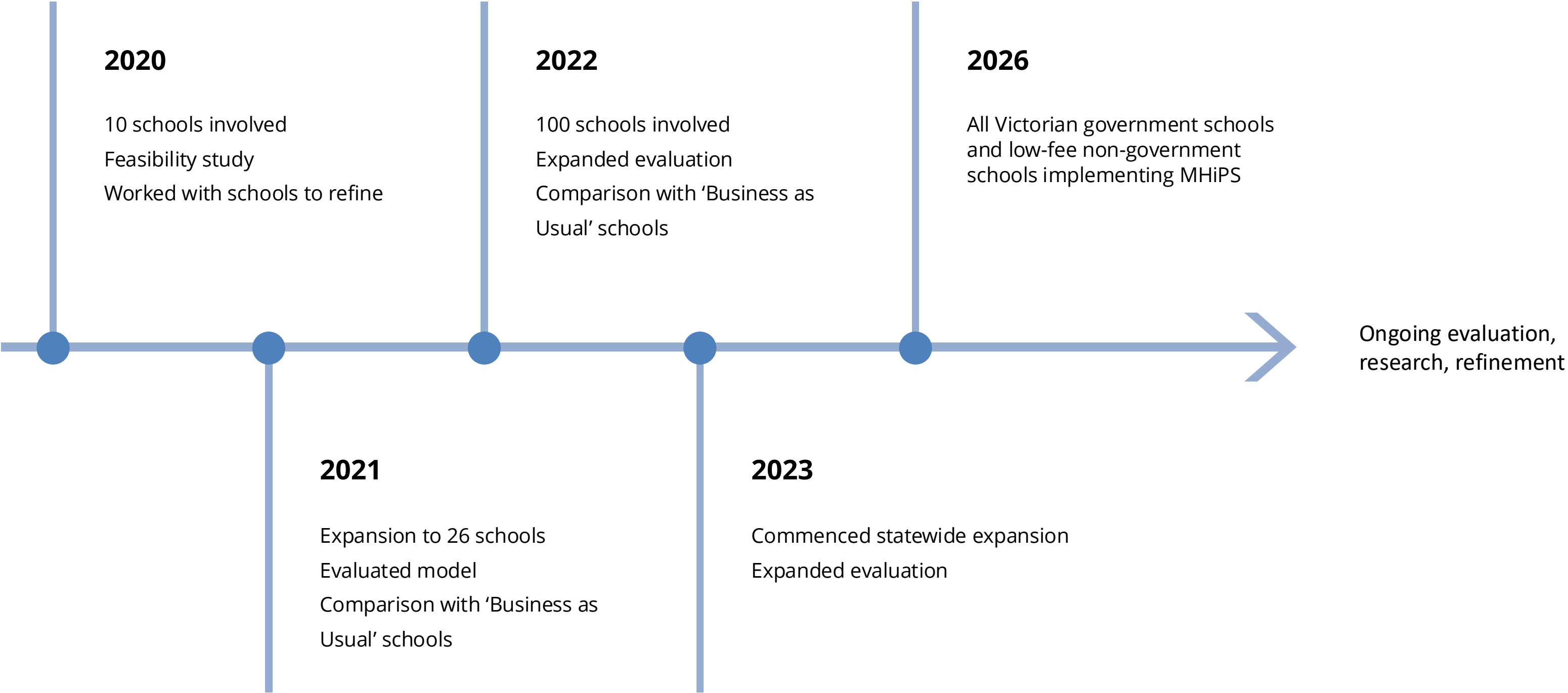
Expertise in policies,
strategies, frameworks

The MHiPS Model





MHiPS in Victoria timeline





Victorian Department of Education





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- SALT Catalyst
- The Ross Trust
- R.M. Ansett Trust
- The Bryan Foundation
- Shepherd Foundation
- Medibank
- The Creswick Foundation



The MHiPS initiative has significantly strengthened early identification and support pathways for students. Staff confidence in recognising early signs of mental health concerns has increased, and collaboration between wellbeing staff, classroom teachers, and leadership is more streamlined. The initiative has also contributed to a clearer whole-school approach to wellbeing and more timely referrals.

MHWL / Assistant Principal