

2019 Submission - Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

Organisation Name

VISION International - An Association of Australian Schools - SUB.0001.0018.0020

Name

Mrs Suzanne Fernandes

How can the Victorian community reduce the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness?

"VISION International member schools believe that education and dialogue are the best tools to promote a proper understanding of the issues people face. Our member schools actively promote dialogue around good mental health, conduct orientation programs for students have ongoing welfare responsibility for students, include health education in the curriculum and provide individual support by trained professionals. As an association we offer at least one seminar a year to our member school representatives on the topic of Mental Health. The compulsory education of children and young adults in schools to distinguish between mental issues and mental illness is important. Young persons need to identify and understand when they are experiencing a temporary issue and seek support without shame to avoid escalation to a more serious level. This should be common practice and therefore schools should be encouraged to teach students from an early age and right through high school, to be aware of what can be classified as an 'issue' which can be addressed with professional help to avoid a more serious outcome. It may take the education of a generation to break down stigmas and barriers and create the appropriate awareness. Mental illness which is a more serious and ongoing issue requires a different level of treatment and for a longer term. Education to create better awareness of this health issue may also be effective in improving understanding and social tolerance. "

What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent mental illness and to support people to get early treatment and support?

"Our member schools (independent, Catholic, some Government schools) have sound student welfare and wellbeing practices embedded in their organization's day-to-day operations. We follow the VRQA's specific guidelines for students aged under 18 years and commit to creating and sustaining a culture of child safety, especially for our international students. This specific welfare responsibility includes supporting their education, physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing and ensuring that they are provided the appropriate networks and resources to support them when they are living away from their families. We provide orientation programs when students join our school programs and conduct safety sessions for our students using multicultural trained professionals (e.g., MFB Flames program, Surf Lifesaving) as well as wellbeing programs for students in a small group setting. Students are made aware of counselling services available at our schools, are overseen by an officer who has responsibility for student wellbeing and have access to a 24-hour emergency contact. Homestay or Boarding coordinators oversee the provision of suitable and age-appropriate student accommodation and maintain effective communication with homestay families so that the early signs of issues are identified and responded to. The level of vigilance around international students and the support systems in place in our school programs works well as we are able to promptly address the issues and respond to specific student needs. In addition we have the invaluable support of the VRQA which provides best practice guidelines, advice and assistance when required. The seminars hosted by

VISION International for its members are designed to educate our members on best practice and encourage information sharing so that we all learn from each other and support each other. This approach of 'it takes a village to raise a child' works effectively as it encourages dialogue especially on the mental health of the students in our care."

What ideas do you have to prevent suicide?

"Dialogue that suicide is not the answer to an issue or illness is a key message for youngsters. Repetition of this message, education programs and continuing discussion in schools, sport settings, social events and in the media is important. The more we talk about it and remove the social stigma, the better chance we have of reaching out to youngsters and offering them alternative responses. Isolation will often lead to poor mental health. When we belong to a group, there is improved mental health, sharing of information and support in times of need. In our schools we seek to do this through education and co-curricular programs. Students are encouraged to learn social and team working skills, build friendships and networking groups. Schools effectively use the idea of BELONGING to improve the overall wellbeing of young people. We prepare students to navigate the less protective world beyond schooling, and encourage students to build lifelong friendship networks to support them through life. The building of resilience in young people is also a key ingredient to good mental health. Self-awareness or knowledge, self-control and sound mental health must be a part of our education process. Regular meditation as well as physical activity could be incorporated into education programs to place the correct emphasis on overall student wellbeing. "

What makes it hard for people to experience good mental health and what can be done to improve this? This may include how people find, access and experience mental health treatment and support and how services link with each other.

"As a society, we need to improve social networking within our local communities as the traditional scaffolds of religious and worship groups, neighborhood groups and scout/guide clubs fall away. Councils may consider programs to improve and build links and engagement between various members of our society, especially the young and the old. Areas for change could be more dialogue about when to seek help as early intervention and support is an important step in improving mental health outcomes. Mental health checkups should be common practice, as much as physical health checks are. Preventative measures for better mental health: - Promote regular outdoor and physical activity (publicise guidelines of how many hours per week) - Promote good physical health, nutrition and eating habits - Focus on building emotional resilience through education and physical activity programs - Create a positive environment with community spaces and activities to connect with others and build friendships - Education around the dangers of isolating behaviours such as excessive screen time or physical inactivity "

What areas and ideas for change you would like the Royal Commission to prioritise?

N/A

Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?

"On behalf of member schools of VISION International, the association believes in the importance of a supportive and effective Mental Health System for Victoria and therefore wholeheartedly endorses the purpose of the Commission."