A whole-school approach to change using the Wellbeing@School tools

(W@S research brief: March 2012)

What is a whole-school approach, and can it be used to create a school climate that deters bullying behaviour?

This research brief discusses how systems thinking can be used by schools to create a safe and caring climate that deters bullying behaviour.

Current thinking about health promotion suggests that systems-thinking **whole-school approaches** are **effective ways of creating change** and improving health and wellbeing in school settings (Stewart-Brown, 2006; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007).

Whole-school approaches have **two key parts:** a **way of thinking about schools** and a **process for change.**

> **The two key parts of a whole-school approach are:**
>
> 1. **a way of thinking about schools** as a multidimensional and interactive system
>
> 2. **a process for change** in schools that involves **all community members working together**.

The content of the Wellbeing@School (W@S) tools draws on this **way of thinking**, and the W@S self-review cycle is based on this **process**.

Systems thinking is not a new idea in the education world. Well-known writers such as Peter Senge (2000) and Michael Fullan (2001, 2005) draw on systems thinking to describe how schools work and to discuss how schools can build their capacity to improve through developing as learning organisations. Learning organisations utilise community strengths to build a shared vision and a plan for change. Both Senge and Fullan consider teachers and students to be underutilised as potential community resource people who can actively contribute to this change process.

What do new ways of thinking about health and wellbeing mean for schools?

Whole-school approaches were developed as a response to changing views about health promotion and education. Since the 1950s, new understandings have developed about the multiple influences on individuals' health and wellbeing. This has resulted in a shift in thinking about the most effective ways of making change and a corresponding development in models and theoretical approaches to health education and promotion (Ministry of Education, 2004).

These theoretical approaches to health education and promotion tend to fall into three categories that can be located on a continuum between an individual and a systems approach. Each theory is based on different assumptions about what it means to be healthy and each suggests different actions needed to support health and wellbeing. Table 1 shows the three categories, the assumptions that underpin them and how each thinks about and addresses social conflicts such as bullying behaviours.

Table 1 **How different theories of health and wellbeing view bullying behaviour**

Theories			
	Individual	**Interpersonal**	**Group or system**
Main focus	Physical health.	Physical and social health.	Interaction between physical, social, emotional and the environment.
Assumptions	Individuals have control over their behaviour and will change behaviour with the right information.	Individual health behaviours are influenced by - relationships - social interactions - social norms. Social interactions can be changed by challenging norms and providing alternative strategies.	Individual behaviours are influenced by many different factors in the social and physical environment. There are different types of interactions within a group and these require different strategies to change.
View of bullying	Bullying is an individual action.	Bullying is an interaction between two or more people that also involves bystanders.	Bullying is a systemic process that involves or is influenced by those who bully, those who are bullied, peers, teachers and the school, home and the wider societal environment.
Strategies to addressing bullying	Educate "about" bullying by providing information about harmful effects. Intervene in behaviour incidents to discipline offenders. Provide skills training for those who bully or who are bullied.	Educate "for" health and wellbeing by developing individuals' skills in addressing interactions.	Develop the skills of groups through multifaceted approaches that address different dimensions of school practice. Seek student and community support and involvement to design a range of approaches.

Until the 1980s, individual and interpersonal theories were most common. Since that time there has been a shift in emphasis away from prioritising the individual perspective towards emphasising the systems-thinking group perspective. The Health and Physical Education learning area in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (*NZC*) (Ministry of Education, 2007) is underpinned by a systems perspective. This is most strongly reflected in Strand D: Healthy communities and environments.

Although **whole-school approaches are based on the systems perspective**, they can also include strategies that are based on individual and interpersonal approaches. As discussed below, multifaceted approaches are more likely to be successful than single-strategy approaches.

The two parts of a whole-school approach

A) A way of thinking about schools

Many schools are involved in whole-school professional learning or have activities that are school wide. These terms are similar but **not the same** as the specific meaning given to the term *"whole-school approach"*. A whole-school approach thinks about a school as a **multidimensional and interactive system that can learn and change**. Thus a whole-school approach is a systems-based or ecological way of viewing a school.

Whole-school approaches commonly define different dimensions of school life, for which different strategies are needed to ensure they are health promoting. The Health Promoting Schools approach, which is used in New Zealand and internationally, defines three interconnected dimensions of a school system: **ethos and environment; curriculum, teaching and learning; and community connections** *(see insert box).*

> **The different dimensions of school life**
>
> - *Ethos and environment:* This includes school policies and culture, leadership practices, the physical environment and student management and support systems.
>
> - *Curriculum, teaching and learning:* This includes curriculum delivery, pedagogy, student skill and competency development, teacher modelling and teacher professional learning and development.
>
> - *Community connections:* This includes connections and partnerships with parents and caregivers, education and health agencies and community groups.

One key premise of a whole-school approach is that change is more likely to happen if consistent approaches and messages are promoted across these different dimensions. Therefore schools can plan to align the different activities in each dimension to ensure they support and build on each other.

Bullying behaviour, along with many other health-related behaviours, is influenced by multiple factors. These are to do with the individual, peers, schools, family, community and society. Researchers suggest that because **bullying behaviour is a systemic problem, it requires a systemic solution**.

Current evidence shows that bullying behaviour at school is best addressed through a multifaceted approach that includes a range of strategies that target the different dimensions of the school system noted above (Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Research shows that **approaches with more strategies tend to be more successful** (Rigby, 2002; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Single-strategy approaches tend to be less effective. Examples of single-strategy approaches include the delegation of responsibility

for managing behaviour to pastoral care staff, a health unit delivered as part of the curriculum or skills training for students (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007).

Current research also suggests that, rather than having a sole focus on anti-bullying, it is **important to focus more widely on creating a caring and respectful school climate** and **positive outcomes such as building students' strategies** for managing their social and emotional wellbeing (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010).

Table 2 shows the different dimensions of school life, and related strategies, which the literature suggests could be addressed as part of a whole-school approach that aims to build a safer and more caring climate that deters bullying (see the W@S Overview paper for more information, Boyd, 2011). Many of these different dimensions and strategies are explored in the W@S tools (see The Aspects of school life explored by W@S).

Table 2 **Dimensions of school life**

> **School ethos and environment**
>
> *School ethos and culture*
> - The leadership team models a caring and collaborative approach.
> - Effective and collaborative processes are used to implement new practices.
> - School activities are planned to create a sense of belonging to school for students and staff.
> - School activities model values such as caring (aroha), respect and hospitality (manaakitanga), and celebrate prosocial (helping and caring) behaviours.
> - The school take steps to ensure it is a safe place for students and staff.
> - School activities acknowledge and affirm students' different cultures and backgrounds.
> - The school has a set of collaboratively developed and shared values and behaviour expectations.
> - There are systems in place for seeking student input and working collaboratively with students to improve wellbeing.
>
> *Physical environment*
> - School buildings and the physical environment are designed as safe spaces that model a sense of community.
>
> *Student support structures and behaviour management processes*
> - Staff are supported to develop shared expectations and approaches to promoting desired behaviours.
> - There are well-understood policies and shared strategies for monitoring and addressing behaviour incidents.
> - Approaches for managing behaviours are fair, consistent and collaborative (include student input).
> - Systems are in place to enable students to offer social support to their peers and problem solve social situations.
> - Break times are effectively managed.
> - Student support is provided (to all students as well as those who are new to school or vulnerable).
> - Vulnerable students are identified and supported.
>
> **Curriculum, teaching and learning**
>
> *Teacher modelling*
> - Teachers are supported to model caring and respectful interactions and have a respect for diversity.
> - Teachers are encouraged to have high expectations for behaviour as well as learning.
>
> *Curriculum learning*
> - Teachers are supported to tailor lessons to students' backgrounds, interests, skills and needs.
> - The curriculum programme is planned to provide students with opportunities to engage in tasks that are likely to enhance their social and emotional competencies.
> - Teachers use strategies that are likely to enhance students' social and emotional competencies (e.g., co-operative learning).
> - Student input is sought in developing social problem-solving strategies.
>
> *Teacher learning*
> - Professional learning experiences support teachers to manage student behaviour in ways that are effective and draw on student input.
> - Professional learning experiences support teachers to offer classroom programmes that enhance students'

B) A process for change

The second key part of a whole-school approach is a **process for change**. Whole-school approaches often use processes that are based on **community development principles**. Community development refers to the idea that change is more likely to occur when the whole school community develops and shares a vision about what it wants to achieve, works to make the vision a reality and acts in ways that are consistent with that vision. In this research brief, the core members of the school community are staff, students, parents and whānau.

Whole-school approaches usually start with the school community engaging in a self-review to raise awareness, identify needs, create a shared vision and commit to action. These ideas have been used to develop the W@S self-review cycle (shown below) which draws on action research and health promotion processes. This diagram shows how the W@S tools and resources can be used as part of this cycle.

Longer term studies of change in school settings often show short-term success, followed by a **return to previous practices** or behaviours over time, or when funding for professional development or other forms of support is reduced. For this reason the use of the W@S tools is grounded in a self-review process that is designed to be longer term, cyclical and managed by schools. Fundamental to this cycle is a focus on data, and the use of both community knowledge and data to design initiatives that work best for each school setting.

Figure 1 **The W@S self-review cycle**
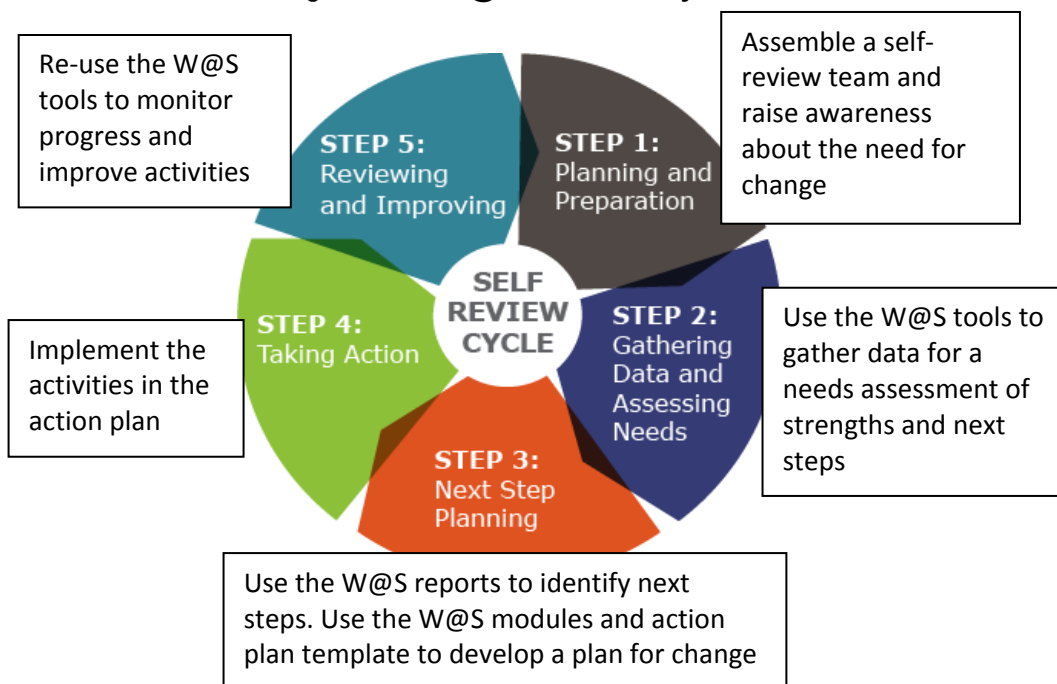
It is important to note that, as each school community is different, each will have different needs. How these needs are best addressed will also vary between schools. For this reason, a whole-school approach is a way of working rather than a defined programme. Strategies and processes will vary, reflecting the unique nature of each school.

Getting started on using a self-review process to manage change

Involving all stakeholders

The importance of involving the whole school community in a change process is noted above. Ways to involve three key groups of school community members are discussed below.

Staff as key stakeholders and leaders

Gaining the commitment of staff is a crucial factor in ensuring change in school settings. Working collaboratively is one way of gaining this commitment. The W@S self-review process commonly starts with the formation of a self-review team that manages a consultation and needs analysis process. The *W@S School Self-Review Tool* and *Teacher Survey* aim to support this process by gathering data about teachers' perspectives on school life. Similarly, the *W@S Student Survey* gathers data on students' perspectives. This self-review team then works with staff, students, parents and whānau to summarise the results of this needs analysis, develop a vision for the future

and an action plan for change. School staff can be core members of this team, and key leaders of activities in the action plan.

The commitment of staff can also be gained by providing: adequate professional learning opportunities; time to consider school data and debate new ideas; and opportunities to see their colleagues modelling new approaches. These approaches all draw on staff's knowledge to enhance practice.

Students as key stakeholders and leaders

Traditionally, students have been the recipients of school health services that are designed for them by others. In the classroom they "learn about" the factors that influence health and wellbeing. The Health and Physical Education (PE) learning area of *NZC* (Ministry of Education, 2007), and current research on health education in schools, both place more emphasis on students actively **"learning for" their health and wellbeing through "learning by doing"** health promotion activities that improve their social and physical environment.

The community development principles that underpin whole-school approaches also promote the idea that students need to be supported to learn about health and wellbeing through being active citizens who are enabled to make meaningful changes to their social environment. Some common ways schools can enable students to "learn about" as well as **"learn for" their health and wellbeing** by **"learning by doing"** are shown in the insert box.

> **Common ways of enabling students to "learn for" their health and wellbeing**
>
> - **including student representatives** on self-review or health and wellbeing teams
>
> - **actively seeking student perspectives** on school life (the W@S *Student Surveys* are designed to support this) and their ideas for improvements
>
> - **creating opportunities within the curriculum programme for students to develop knowledge, skills and competencies** (e.g., students can work together to develop a plan to improve an aspect of school life such as the strategies used to welcome new arrivals or to manage social conflicts)
>
> - **enabling students to take leadership roles** that promote health and wellbeing (e.g., students can show leadership through activities such as being a buddy for a new student).

Parents and whānau as key stakeholders and leaders

NZC sets up an expectation that schools will **work in partnership with parents and whānau**. *NZC* notes that schools need to design a curriculum that addresses student and community needs, interests and circumstances. In regard to the Health and PE learning area, *NZC* states:

> … it expected that schools will consult with their communities when developing health and sexuality education programmes. (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.22)

The curriculum also suggests that school health practices have the potential to enhance students' wellbeing beyond the classroom, particularly when approaches are supported by the wider school community. Thus *NZC* envisages schools working actively with parents and whānau and other community members to enhance the wellbeing of young people.

The types of activities parents and whānau can be involved in span:

- receiving information about new school approaches (e.g., via school events, newsletters or parent information evenings)
- taking part in consultations
- visioning and planning (e.g., through involvement in school self-review and planning teams)
- educating and training (e.g., being the recipients, supporters or organisers of learning sessions)
- monitoring and evaluating
- joint problem solving.

There are many different types of partnerships, but **an active partnership involves** parents and whānau in **more than just receiving information**. In an active partnership, parents and whānau are enabled to take part in school visioning, planning and problem solving alongside staff and students. The community development processes that are part of a whole-school approach offer schools a process for working with parents and whānau in an active partnership.

Connecting whole-school approaches and New Zealand education

Connections to *The New Zealand Curriculum*

At the heart of the Health and PE learning area of *NZC* (Ministry of Education, 2007) are four concepts: hauora; attitudes and values; the socioecological perspective; and health promotion. All of these have strong connections with the philosophy and processes of whole-school approaches. Both whole-school approaches and *NZC* encourage school communities to engage in health promotion to "develop and maintain supportive physical and emotional environments" in ways that involve students in "personal and collective action" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.22).

New Zealand research suggests that use of whole-school approaches can assist schools to realise the intent of the curriculum (Boyd, 2009a, 2009b). For example, developing students' skills, competencies and ability to show leadership in ways that enhance their or the school community's health and wellbeing appears to be well-aligned with the intent of the Health and PE learning area. The strands that most reflect these ideas are Strand C: Relationships with other people, and Strand D: Healthy communities and

environments. For an overview, see [Connections between W@S and educational directions in New Zealand.](#)

The idea that students can be actively involved citizens who contribute to societal wellbeing is also strongly reflected in the vision, key competencies, principles and values at the heart of *NZC*.

Working for Māori success in school

Māori students are overrepresented in New Zealand schools' stand-down and suspension statistics and underrepresented in achievement statistics. Strategies and actions designed to create a safe and caring school climate need to recognise that current approaches to both learning and behaviour management do not always serve Māori well. *Ka Hikitia—Managing for Success—The Māori Education Strategy* (Ministry of Education, 2009) states educators need to ensure that new approaches are culturally responsive and align with Māori worldviews. The Māori potential approach to education outlined in *Ka Hikitia* suggests a number of areas of focus (see Table 3).

Table 3 **Māori potential approach to education***

Less focus on …	*More focus on …*
Remedying deficit	Realising potential
Problems of dysfunction	Identifying opportunity
Government intervention	Investing in people and local solutions
Targeting deficit	Tailoring education to the learner
Māori as a minority	Indigeneity and distinctiveness
Instructing and informing	Collaborating and co-constructing

* Source: Ministry of Education (2009, p.19)

Macfarlane (2009) also considers processes such as co-construction and community consultation are effective ways of involving Māori students and whānau to ensure that their culture counts and is reflected in school practices. Knowing, respecting and valuing who students are, where they come from and what they bring, is essential to schools forming productive partnerships with Māori students and their whānau.

Co-construction and community consultation processes are integral to the processes promoted by many whole-school approaches, and Māori students and whānau are key people to involve in any school self-review.

What next?

To find out more about the steps in the W@S self-review process, see [Getting started with self-review](#) and [Planning and preparing for self-review](#).

Further information

For more information about the literature overview that informed this research brief, see

Link to W@S Overview paper

Link to W@S summary booklet.

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