
Mercers' Wellbeing Evaluation Programme: final report

October 2022



EBPU
Evidence Based
Practice Unit

A partnership of



CORC
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Research Consortium

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Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families



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Mercers' Wellbeing Evaluation Programme: executive summary



In recent years there has been an increase in rates of mental health difficulty among young people and a decline in their wellbeing.

Wider research suggests that some approaches show promise for supporting young people's wellbeing within education settings, including those based on building social and emotional skills or those based on cognitive behavioural principles.

However, research also emphasises that even interventions that have a strong evidence base can vary in their effectiveness, depending on how they are implemented and how well they fit the context in which they are delivered.

The Mercers' Wellbeing Evaluation Programme aimed to support Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges to evaluate their mental health and wellbeing provision. The programme was delivered in two phases between 2016 and 2022. The final report from the Mercers' Wellbeing Evaluation Programme is available online. It summarises the learning and achievements of the programme's second phase, setting these within the context of the programme as a whole.



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Achievements

Wellbeing survey

More than 10,500 wellbeing surveys were completed by students in Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges during the programme, in spite of significant challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic. The data collected were used to understand the strengths and needs of the student population and to target support where it was most needed.

Sharing learning from these schools and colleges with wider populations of schools and colleges nationally has supported the increase in use of such wellbeing measurement tools more broadly.

In-depth evaluation

We carried out six in-depth evaluations of interventions delivered in Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges during the programme. The schools and colleges that participated in these in-depth evaluations particularly appreciated access to independent evaluation that provided additional capacity and learning opportunities.

Capacity building

Working with the evaluation team and attending the workshops improved staff knowledge and skills around evaluation. Discussions at the workshops demonstrated that participating staff are now confident in considering and implementing evaluation when planning wellbeing provision for students.

Sharing between settings

The regular opportunity to share experiences and good practice between Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges was particularly valued and added significantly to the learning accrued. Sessions were also an opportunity to receive guidance on selecting interventions when the array on offer is overwhelming.



Outputs

We produced the following outputs as part of this work:



37

bespoke reports created, reporting wellbeing data collected from more than 15,000 students

21

workshops and webinars delivered for Mercers' Associated Schools' and Colleges' staff

8

briefings published sharing learning from this programme

6

in-depth evaluations of wellbeing support provided for students by schools and colleges

In addition, we provided regular support to school and college contacts to assist evaluation within their setting and the approach to evaluation was presented at a national conference.

Challenges

Some challenges were identified by schools and colleges. The majority of these related to staffing capacity and the ability to prioritise this work, without having specifically allocated protected time. A lack of capacity could sometimes make it difficult to maintain momentum and embed an evaluation approach.

Key findings and recommendations

1. The pragmatic IDEA (Intervention description, Design, Evaluation implementation, Analysis and dissemination) approach developed in this programme has been demonstrated to be a [feasible and valuable approach to evaluation](#) for schools and colleges.
2. Given that the research emphasises the importance of context, schools and colleges can only be confident that adopted programmes are supporting their students effectively if they are evaluated in situ. This programme has demonstrated practical and manageable ways that schools and colleges can carry out such evaluations.
3. The importance of centring the voice of children and young people in planning support has been highlighted and practical suggestions of how this might be achieved have been provided in [an additional briefing](#).
4. For support for young people to be most effective, programmes to improve the mental health and wellbeing of students should be embedded in a wider culture that supports and prioritises the wellbeing of students and teachers.



Achievements and outputs

Background and rationale

The policy landscape for children's mental health has shifted significantly in recent years. There is increasing recognition that educational settings like schools and colleges are vital for prevention and early intervention in mental health problems.

While a range of school-based mental health programmes exist, there are a number of challenges to identifying effective interventions suitable for rollout within schools and colleges:

- 1) There is mixed evidence for existing interventions, with only a few having compelling evidence of effectiveness.
- 2) Little of the existing evidence is accessible to schools and colleges.
- 3) Evidence that does exist is often based on studies carried out in the US or in other educational systems quite different from those in the UK.
- 4) Even with the most effective interventions, context and implementation have a huge bearing on effectiveness.

For these reasons, there has been increasing emphasis on the importance of evaluating programmes in situ to ensure that the approach adopted is actually helping to achieve the expected outcomes, with specific interest in the development of guidance for schools and colleges to help them measure pupils' mental health and wellbeing. However, currently there is little guidance about the approaches that schools and colleges should take, or how to extract learning from any information collected.

This lack of guidance around how schools and colleges should evaluate their own mental health practices is something that this Anna Freud Centre-led programme has been supporting Mercers' Company Associated Schools and Colleges to address.

This is the final report for work that was commissioned from October 2019 to October 2022 as a continuation of a previous three-year programme which ended in September 2019. This report will reflect the achievements of the second phase of this programme alongside that of the programme overall.

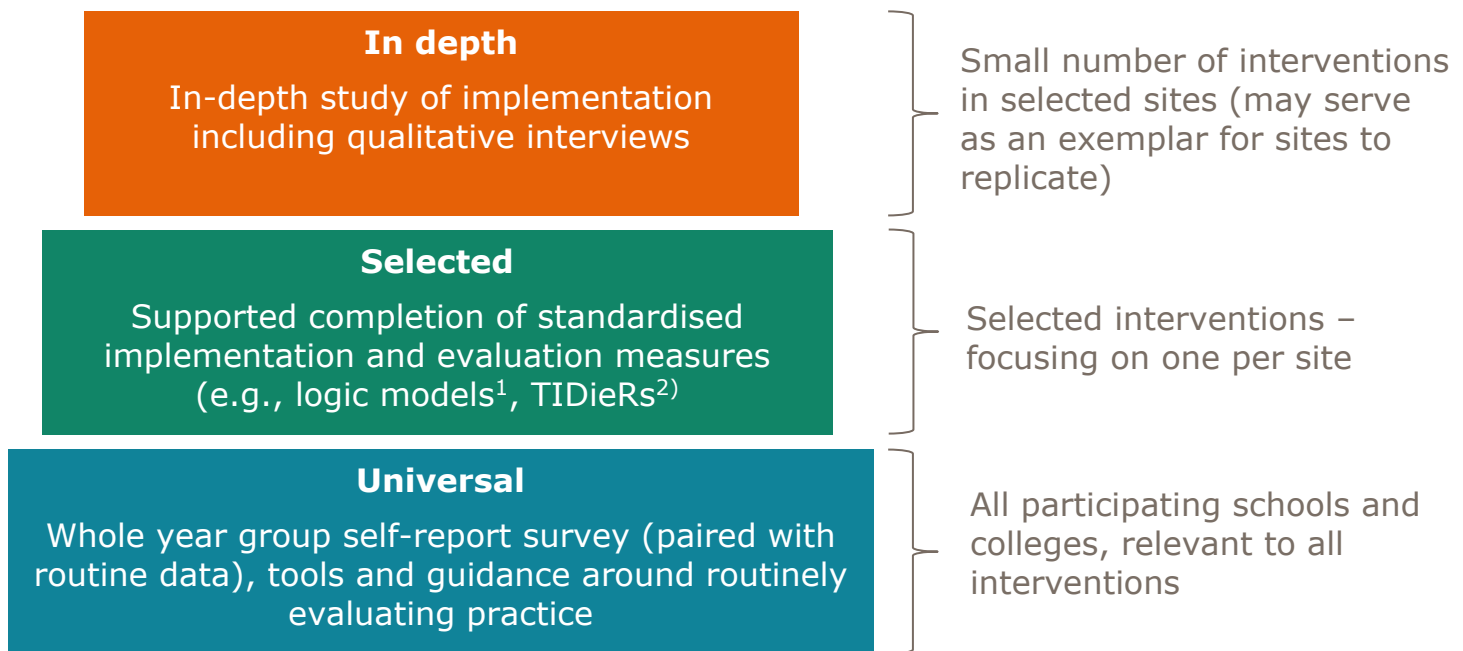
Aims of phase one of the programme

The initial three-year programme was commissioned by the Mercers' Company based on discussion with the Company's Associated Schools and Colleges who all shared concerns about the mental health and emotional wellbeing of their students and the need for further guidance around what they can do to bolster students' wellbeing and support those experiencing difficulties. In recognition

of this need, the Mercers' Company sought to commission independent evaluations of ongoing mental health support undertaken in a number of the Company's Associated Schools and Colleges. Recognising that this need was ongoing, the Mercers' Company extended this work further in 2019 to 2022.

Given the high degree of heterogeneity in approaches implemented by Mercers' schools and colleges, a layered but flexible approach was adopted (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The evaluation approach



The aims of the programme were therefore:

1. to support the evaluation of a range of school- and college-based interventions aimed at supporting mental health and wellbeing
2. to undertake process (implementation) evaluation for three selected programmes
3. to generate and facilitate learning regarding effective practice to support students' mental health and wellbeing for schools and colleges and for wider audiences.

¹ Wolpert, M., Sharpe, H., Humphrey, N., Patalay, P. & Deighton, J. (2016). EBP Logic Model. London.

² Hoffmann, T.C., et al. (2014) Better reporting of interventions: Template for intervention description and replication (TIDieR) checklist and guide. *British Medical Journal*, 348:g1687.

Achievements from phase one of the programme

There were four key achievements from the first three years of the programme:

The development of school- and college-based models for measuring wellbeing in schools

The measurement frameworks developed and used with Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges through the first three years of this programme have also been adopted by other schools and colleges across the country. The development and roll-out of these approaches led to interest and discussion with policymakers, including workshops delivered to Department for Education (DfE) policymakers, discussion at DfE roundtable events concerning character education, as well as ad hoc consultation with DfE and the Department of Health and Social Care. In particular, there was growing policy interest in giving guidance to schools around evaluating mental health support provided. Some of the Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges also commented on the benefits of being able to use the feedback generated from these measures to review any changes over time in students' mental health and wellbeing.

Improved understanding of the extent of mental health problems in schools and colleges

The rollout of these tools to Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges contributed to widespread data capture for students' mental health and wellbeing. This provided much needed insight into the levels of psychological distress reported by children and young people and revealed important variation between settings. This highlights the huge variation in need from one school or college to the next and also potential examples of best practice in schools and colleges.

Learning about the outcomes achieved through the implementation of interventions

The subset of schools and colleges involved in the three in-depth evaluations conducted as part of phase 1 of the evaluation reported that their in-depth evaluation reports allowed them to share learning with other senior leaders in their setting and share learning about the benefits and challenges of their interventions. Where findings pointed to positive impact, this helped to make the case for continued support for the approach.

More opportunities for collaboration and shared learning

Many participating schools and colleges said that they particularly welcomed the opportunity to meet with others with similar priorities and interests across the Mercers' Company Associated Schools and Colleges. Often those involved in this kind of work within schools and colleges can feel isolated so these networking opportunities, as well as updates and presentations from the evaluation team and wider Anna Freud Centre, provided crucial 'bigger picture' learning in the field of child mental health and wellbeing. Our workshops included updates on the programme, sharing wider learning (including new and upcoming results from other programmes) and guest speakers (to talk about new tools or approaches and their benefit to schools and colleges). The school and college staff stated that they enjoyed learning how other settings were implementing their interventions, sharing common struggles and how they overcame them. They also described benefitting greatly from hearing about new and upcoming results from wider programmes and listening to guest speakers.



Aims of the second phase of the programme

The first three years of this programme were mostly focused on generating evidence. The aim for phase two was to expand this activity to include further schools and colleges, and to undertake further in-depth evaluations. In addition, we aimed to use the learning generated by this collaboration to disseminate evidence and models of practice into the wider school and college communities, to educational settings nationally and to policy makers.

After consultation with Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges, we proposed to keep a similar three-level process as previously employed:

- a) School and college wellbeing survey.
- b) Ongoing support and consultation for measurement and monitoring.
- c) In-depth evaluations (three to five more over the three-year period, depending on scale).

During the second phase of the programme, we also responded to learning from challenges faced during the first phase and took the following actions.

Finding the right means of communication

To improve our communication with schools and colleges we:

- offered reimbursement to schools and colleges for their travel to workshops
- continued to consult with attendees about what they would like to see in workshops to ensure these were as engaging and worthwhile as possible
- increased the number of workshops - one-to-one emails and phone calls between workshops were also employed to ensure continued support, and to encourage progress.

We found that in-person workshops were not only difficult to arrange during the coronavirus pandemic period of time but they also limited the engagement of schools and colleges due to the time and travel commitment involved. Once workshops were held online a wider range of staff from participating schools and colleges were able to attend.

Maintaining engagement

Due to increasingly squeezed school schedules and the challenges of regular staff turnover we:

- invested significant energy in engaging new staff members, ensuring we had multiple contacts at each setting and escalating any issues to the Mercers' Company

- monitored risks and mitigations, including engagement, in programme proposals and reviewed these regularly raising concerns with the Mercers' Company as they arose
- produced more school- and college-friendly briefings to engage the wider community of schools and colleges.

Routine data capture

During the first phase, it was challenging to gather robust data for evaluations from schools and colleges despite it being routinely collected. To address this, we:

- produced new templates in collaboration with Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges to collect the necessary information
- established clear data sharing agreements for transparency.

Achievements and outputs from the second phase of the programme

In this section, the outputs and the main achievements from the second phase of the programme are detailed. Table 1 summarises the outputs commissioned in this phase. Further details are given below alongside other notable achievements from the programme.

Table 1: Commissioned outputs

Output	Quantity commissioned	Quantity delivered
Wellbeing survey	Two rounds of data collection and bespoke reports for all schools and colleges	Due to school closures during coronavirus lockdown, there was only take up for one round of data collection. Additional webinars were provided instead to connect settings during this time and share emerging learning.
Workshops	Five	Nine (including webinars held in response to coronavirus restrictions)

In-depth evaluations	Three to five	Four (including one that spanned both phases of the programme)
Briefings	Six (including at least two targeted at young people and one synthesising learning across the programme)	Seven (including at least two targeted at young people and one synthesising learning across the programme)

School and college engagement

At the start of phase 2, determined efforts were made to engage all Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges and offer them the opportunity to participate in the programme. The continuation of the programme and the activity planned for the second phase was communicated to all of the Headteachers in an attempt to engage some settings that had previously been disengaged. This approach was moderately successful as one primary school engaged for the first time and one secondary school re-engaged with the programme.

Table 2: Engagement of schools and colleges participating in phase 2 activity

Settings	Number of settings participating in the WMF survey	Number of settings participating in workshops	Number of settings participating in in-depth evaluation	Number of settings participating in other activities
Primary	1	3	2	0
Secondary	4 (2 included students aged 16-18)	7	1	3 settings contributed to briefings and 1 presented at a national event
Further education	0	2	1	1 contributed to a briefing
Total	5	12	4	

Table 3: Number of schools and colleges engaged with the programme by year

Year	Number of primary schools engaged	Number of secondary schools engaged	Number of colleges engaged	Total
2017	3	9	2	14
2018	2	8	2	12
2019	2	7	2	11
2020	2	5	2	9
2021	2	5	2	9
2022	3	7	2	12

School and college wellbeing surveys

Two further rounds of wellbeing surveys were commissioned as part of phase two of the wellbeing evaluation programme.

Completion rates 2020

Data collection was due to start in spring 2020 and several schools and colleges were preparing for survey completion. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated school closures made data collection impossible. Ethics amendments were submitted to allow for home completion of surveys while schools and colleges were working remotely. There was some interest in this approach from a couple of schools but in the end, it proved too challenging.

Completion rates 2021

Data collection in 2021 proved challenging as some restrictions continued in schools and colleges and many students were absent due to individual isolations or bubble closures. In addition, school and college staff, particularly those with pastoral responsibilities, were under increased pressure as they responded to an increased need for support among their students. In these challenging circumstances more than 2,000 students still completed the Wellbeing Measurement Framework (WMF) survey.

Table 4: WMF completion rates 2021

Educational stage	Number of settings	Number of students completing the survey	Completion rate (those that completed/were eligible to complete within these schools)
Primary	1	56	100%
Secondary	4	1969	77%
Further education	0	0 ³	-
Total	5	2025	

Each school that completed the survey received a bespoke report that showed how the results in their school compared with schools across the country.

Across the life of the programme, 13 individual Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges took part in the survey and more than 10,000 surveys were completed. A total of 37 survey feedback reports were produced and shared with schools and colleges.

Table 5: WMF completion across the programme

Year	Number of students completing the survey	Number of schools/colleges participating
2017	2816	12
2018	2717	10
2019	2965	10
2020	-	-
2021	2025	5
Total	10,523	13

³ Data collection has been ongoing in one college using a smaller set of wellbeing measures

Workshops

Learning from the first phase of the programme suggested that schools and colleges engaged most with in-person workshops and one to one support from the evaluation team. Due to the coronavirus pandemic only three of these workshops were delivered in person. The online attendance at the webinars was strong, however, and informal feedback suggested that these were useful. The evaluation team were committed to delivering five workshops across phase 2. Due to an increased need for support and in response to positive feedback, nine workshops were delivered.⁴

Table 6: Phase 2 workshops

Focus	Format	Settings attending
November 2019		
Findings from 2019 survey period	In-person	6
Plans for the new phase of the programme		
Sharing wider learning: The LINK programme & links to the green paper		
Developing plans for evaluation of interventions		
January 2020		
Sharing wider learning: Whole school approaches – the Community Wellbeing Project	In-person	7
Sharing wider learning: Gender differences in mental health difficulties		
2020 survey period		
Dissemination of learning: Parent focussed briefing		
Further developing plans for evaluation of interventions		
April 2020		
Challenges faced by settings in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic	Online	4
Approaches taken in response to these challenges		
Sharing of relevant resources		
Forward planning – how can we help?		

⁴ Deighton, J., Stapley, E., Lereya, S.T., Burrell, K. & Atkins, L. (2019) Measuring pupil mental health and wellbeing: examples of best practice from schools and colleges working with the Mercers' Company. EBPU briefing note. [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/sites/evidence-based-practice-unit/files/Mercers' report final nov 2019.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/sites/evidence-based-practice-unit/files/Mercers%27report_final_nov_2019.pdf)

October 2020		
Check-in how are things going? How can we help?	Online	4
Update on survey plans for 20/21		
Sharing wider learning: COVID-19 and mental health emerging evidence and research bites		
School and college response to COVID-19		
Reviewing evaluation planning		
January 2021		
Check-in how are things going? How can we help?	Online	6
Programme update – changes to surveys and upcoming briefings		
Co-production of research		
Evaluation discussions		
April 2021		
Check-in how are things going? How can we help?	Online	5
Sharing wider learning: Traumatic bereavement		
Update on co-production and survey plans		
Evaluation discussions		
October 2021		
Check-in: how are things going?	Online	6
Survey feedback		
Embedding support across the system: what do we know from HeadStart and beyond?		
Evaluation discussions		
Practice share: sustained developments in support for pupils post pandemic		
Planning for future workshops		
February 2022		
Check-in: how are things going?	Online	5
Sharing new relevant resources from the Anna Freud Centre Schools Division		
Planning for final workshops: what do you want included?		
Looking forward: what support do you want from the final stages of the programme		
Evaluation discussions		

June 2022

Check-in: how are things going?

In-person

9

Sharing wider learning: traumatic bereavement and supporting refugee and asylum-seeking children

Reflecting on the programme

During the coronavirus pandemic, after discussion with the Mercers' Company and Associated Schools and Colleges, we moved the workshops online and shortened them to two hours. We prioritised space for discussion about the issues being faced and the sharing of learning between members of the group. We responded to requests for information and support where we could, for example sharing resources around traumatic bereavement, whole school approaches and emerging coronavirus research. Attendance during this period was lower than at other times as staff had limited time available but those that were able to attend found this support useful.

This series of workshops built on six workshops and four webinars delivered in phase one, including capacity building sessions and learning about co-production, staff wellbeing and whole-school approaches to mental health and wellbeing.

In-depth evaluations

During the second phase of the programme three new in-depth evaluations were conducted and another in-depth evaluation from phase one was continued.

Table 7: Phase 2 in-depth evaluations

Type of intervention	Name of intervention	Educational stage	Type of evaluation
Mindfulness	Ten Minutes Peace	Primary school	Quantitative and qualitative
Mentoring	ELSA	Primary school	Quantitative and qualitative
Mentoring	Learning mentors (level 3)	Secondary school	Quantitative and qualitative
Mindfulness	.b mindfulness	College	Quantitative

A detailed bespoke evaluation report has been produced and shared with the school or college and the Mercers' Company.

Across the programme six in-depth evaluations have been conducted. Details of in-depth evaluations carried out as part of the first phase of the programme have been published elsewhere.

Learning outputs

The dissemination of emerging learning to a wider audience beyond the participating schools and colleges was a key focus for phase 2 of the programme and a total of seven briefings were commissioned and delivered as part of this work.

Table 8: Briefings produced and disseminated in phase 2

Outline	Target audience	Dissemination
Supporting mental health in schools and colleges (for parents and carers)		
Bespoke briefing for individual schools and colleges, introducing wellbeing measurement and including signposting of local and national mental health support	For parents and carers of students attending Associated Schools and Colleges	Through Associated Schools and Colleges
Supporting mental health in schools and colleges (for young people)		
Bespoke briefing for individual schools and colleges, introducing wellbeing measurement and including signposting of local and national mental health support	For students attending Associated Schools and Colleges	Through Associated Schools and colleges
Children’s mental health in the time of coronavirus: what we know about what hurts and what helps		
Presenting learning about the impact of the coronavirus on mental health and how best to support young people	Education and health professionals, parents and carers, general public	Through Anna Freud Centre and CORC networks ⁵ , newsletters, social media and on their websites
Unprecedented challenges and innovative responses: schools’ and colleges’ experiences of supporting mental health and wellbeing during the coronavirus pandemic		
Sharing learning from Mercers’ Associated Schools and Colleges about the challenges they have faced during the coronavirus pandemic and how	Education professionals and policy makers	Through Anna Freud Centre and CORC networks, newsletters, social

⁵ These include Anna Freud Learning network (>29,000 members), Schools in Mind network (>35,000 members), Anna Freud Centre general newsletter (9,000 subscribers), Mentally Healthy Schools newsletter (14,000 subscribers) and CORC newsletter (>3,400 subscribers).

they have responded to these challenges

media and on their websites

Engaging students with wellbeing survey findings

Guidance to support schools and colleges in engaging students with the findings from wellbeing surveys to improve educator's understanding of the findings

Education professionals

Through Anna Freud Centre and CORC networks, newsletters, social media and on their websites

What we know about mental health

Briefing for young people summarising research about mental health including prevalence and risk and protective factors

Young people

Through Anna Freud Centre and CORC networks, newsletters, social media and on their websites

Evaluating programmes to support pupil mental health and wellbeing: examples of best practice from schools and colleges working with the Mercers' Company

A description of the evaluation approach taken in this programme and a synthesis of the learning from these evaluations

Policy makers, researchers, education and health professionals

Through Anna Freud Centre and CORC networks, newsletters, social media and on their websites

In addition, work from the programme was presented at a national Schools in Mind conference in November 2020, attended by over 1,000 delegates⁶. Dr Rebecca Somerfield, Walsall Academy, and Professor Jess Deighton, Anna Freud Centre, jointly presented the approach taken to wellbeing measurement.

Bespoke evaluation support

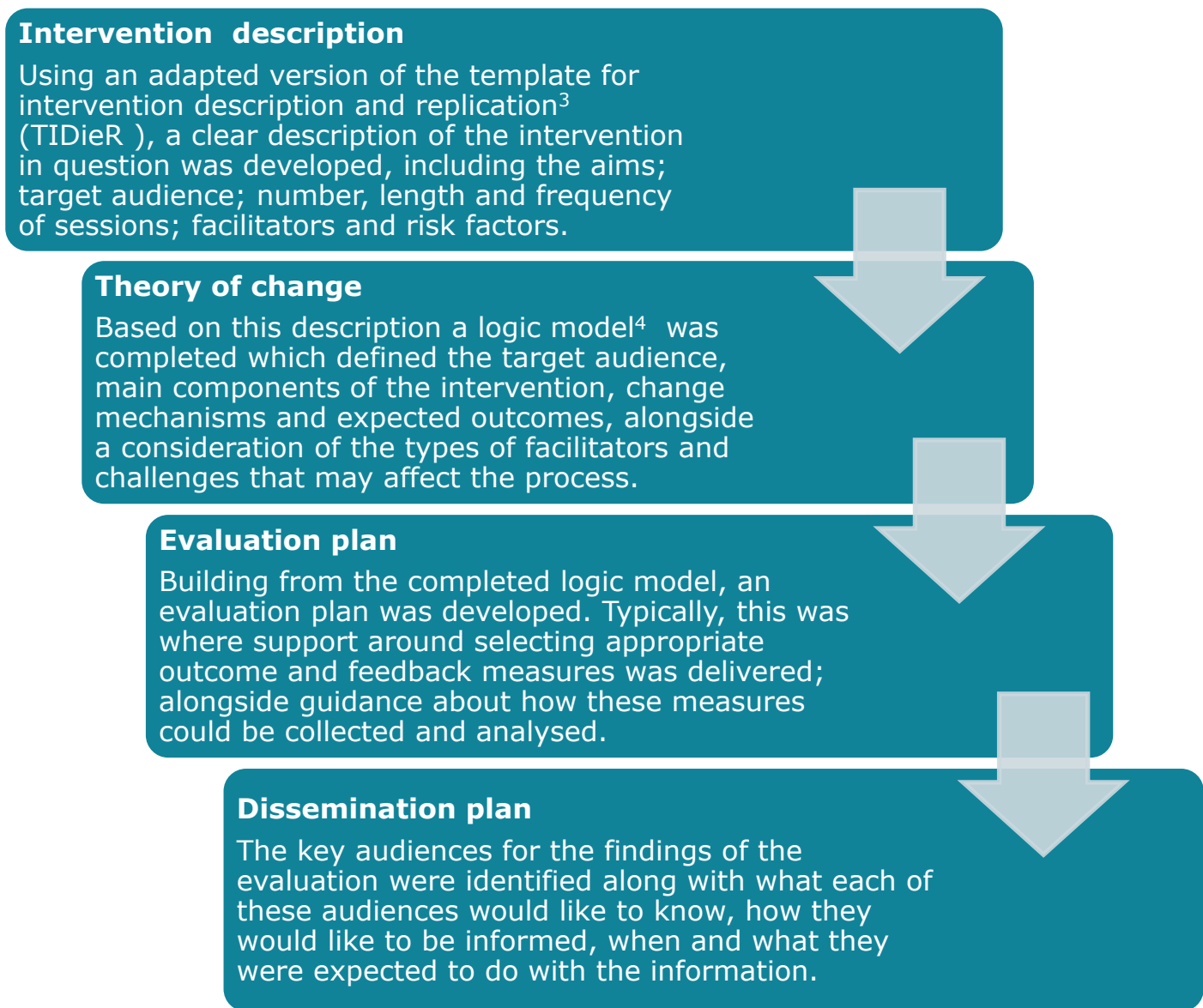
A central theme of the programme over both phases was to develop the capacity and confidence of Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges to design and implement evaluation work associated with any wellbeing support provided for students. The in-depth evaluation work involved conducting the evaluation for sites, in ways that they could learn from and sustain. Alongside this direct bespoke support was provided for other sites so that they could carry out meaningful evaluation work themselves.

In each programme year, all participating schools and colleges were asked to consider what type(s) of interventions and support they were providing, or planning to provide, for students. They were then supported to follow a process similar to the IDEA (Intervention description, Design, Evaluation

⁶ <https://www.annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/resources/5-steps-seminars/>

implementation, Analysis and reporting) approach described in a previous evidence briefing⁷, to build in evaluation for these.

Figure 2: Bespoke evaluation support



Engagement with this aspect of the programme was good, particularly when built into programme workshops and webinars. Feedback from the schools and colleges following these discussions indicated that this process enabled them to think more clearly about the interventions being provided in their educational

⁷ Deighton, J., Stapley, E., Lereya, S.T., Burrell, K. & Atkins, L. (2019) Measuring pupil mental health and wellbeing: examples of best practice from schools and colleges working with the Mercers’ Company. EBPU briefing note. [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/sites/evidence-based-practice-unit/files/Mercers’report_final_nov_2019.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/sites/evidence-based-practice-unit/files/Mercers%27report_final_nov_2019.pdf)

setting and how they would be able to capture relevant evaluation findings in a simple but effective way.

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic a significant number of schools and colleges had drafted logic models and evaluation plans but this intended work was significantly disrupted by the arrival of the pandemic. Support for students changed significantly, schools and colleges moved contact with students online, prioritised keeping in regular contact with all students and provided what support they could for pupils who needed it.



Reflections and learning

What the Mercers' wellbeing evaluation programme has achieved: A programme team perspective on its impact

Looking back over the last six years, there have been a number of achievements and points of learning, some of which have fed into adaptations made during the programme and others might inform the possible future direction of work in this area for Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges.

WMF survey

For those that engaged with it, the WMF survey proved a useful basis for understanding the mental health and wellbeing strengths and needs of their students. Results have been used to consider areas of strength and difficulty relative to other schools and have been used in leadership team discussions to inform how support and resources might be allocated for areas of particular need. Several schools have reported that survey feedback has also been a tool that has enabled them to raise the profile of mental health and wellbeing with senior leadership teams and boards of governors. Several schools have also expressed a wish to continue the survey in future years.

The survey approach proved slightly more challenging for colleges, where the size of the student population and the nature of the communications and contact time with students made this approach more difficult to implement. The approach taken by some colleges was to select a subset of students to survey either year-on-year, or before and after specific interventions. This made participation much more manageable.

Sharing learning from Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges with wider populations has supported the increase in use of such measurement tools in schools and colleges nationally. For example, the approach taken to wellbeing measurement was shared with over 1,000 school-based professionals during a Schools in Mind⁸ event, as described above.

In-depth evaluation

There has been good uptake throughout the programme of the in-depth evaluation offer. While these evaluations, by their nature, are small-scale so do not lend themselves to generalisable conclusions, they have provided helpful insight for those providing this support about what seems to be working, what

⁸ <https://www.annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/>

the children and young people have found helpful, and how the support might be improved. While it is important to select evidence-based interventions for use in schools, this does not guarantee that the intervention will be successful in other settings and it is important to also evaluate how the intervention is working when rolled out in a new context. We recognise that this can be challenging and therefore we have highlighted an approach that can work in schools and colleges. This approach demonstrates how pragmatic evaluation carried out in situ is an essential part of finding out 'what works' for a particular setting and improving the quality of support.

The in-depth evaluations have demonstrated to schools and colleges how a robust evaluation, involving both qualitative and quantitative methods, can be carried out in their settings. The role of validated measures for capturing pupil outcomes data alongside the delivery of formalised and confidential pupil interviews was a key aspect of this. Schools and colleges also reported benefit in receiving a thorough, independent evaluation report, clearly detailing and presenting reliable findings which can be used to make improvements to provision.

Evaluation capabilities

A significant aspect of the programme focused upon both inspiring schools and colleges to carry out evaluation work as well as developing their knowledge, skills and confidence to do so. It is still commonplace for schools and colleges generally, just like those participating in this programme in the early years, to bring in or implement interventions without fully considering how effective they are and for whom. When the idea of evaluation is introduced it can be seen as a daunting task, beyond the expertise of staff. A key achievement of the programme is the shifting of this way of thinking for participating schools and colleges; evaluation is considered when designing interventions for students and they have a process to follow and the skills to carry it out. A key indicator of this achievement is the ease of which a number of schools and colleges now talk about evaluation and their knowledge of it during the regular workshops.

Sharing between settings

A fundamental aspect of the programme, which can be easy to neglect and that was brought to significant prominence as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, is the sharing of experience and learning between schools and colleges. Prior to the pandemic, sites discussed common student wellbeing concerns (pupil anxiety being high on list) and activities that they were either implementing or planning to implement to support pupils. With the arrival of the pandemic these discussions became a central focus and the programme provided a much needed space for schools and colleges to share experiences, discuss shared challenges, raise questions, share materials and approaches and to hear from others about what they were doing to meet the needs of their students. This time, we believe, helped alleviate some of the feelings of isolation and the day-to-day challenges – the need to deal with presenting

issues each day without space to think beyond them – and also provided the opportunity to hear what had worked in other settings.

What the Mercers’ wellbeing evaluation programme has achieved: The schools’ and colleges’ perspectives on its impact

A formal session was provided for Mercers’ Associated Schools and Colleges to give reflections and feedback about the programme during the final workshop, but we also received a range of informal feedback throughout the programme. This feedback is summarised below.

Main achievements of the programme

Schools and colleges identified six main areas of achievement, where the programme has made a difference to their work.

Table 9: Achievements

Area of achievement	How the programme has made a difference
Peer to peer sharing	The supported sharing of experiences enabled schools and colleges to connect with and learn from peers from varied settings with different approaches that they would otherwise not have met.
Understanding the impact of support provided	The programme helped schools and colleges to understand how the support they were providing was being received by students and whether it was meeting the needs identified.
Engagement with governors	Engagement with the programme supported work with governors through providing ‘concrete’ information for them to consider. Staff wellbeing measurement tools were identified as particularly helpful in engaging governors.
Supported use of a logic model	The supported use of a logic model gave schools and colleges a ‘starting point’ from which to plan and deliver their wellbeing work.
Understanding the evidence base	Schools and colleges reflected that building their knowledge about the evidence base enabled them to choose, with confidence, which wellbeing activities to engage in.

The production of robust and reliable bespoke data reports, such as the WMF and in-depth evaluation reports, gave the findings a high profile within the school and governance.

Access to resources

The sharing of free, relevant, evidence-based resources during the programme has made a positive difference to schools and colleges. The sharing of training opportunities, the Mentally Healthy Schools website and the 5 Steps to Wellbeing were highlighted as particularly helpful.

The most useful aspects of the programme

The most useful aspects of the programme identified by schools and colleges cover the three main areas of work.

Table 10: Useful aspects

Useful aspect	How this has helped
Survey data collection	The collection of wellbeing survey data has been helpful to identify how the students are feeling and how this changes over time. This is particularly important in the context of limited resources, to evidence the challenges faced and identify where support might be most needed. This has also felt like a helpful move towards starting to standardise wellbeing measures across schools.
Evaluation support	Support in evaluating interventions within the school's or college's context was helpful in determining the impact of the provision and being able to feed findings back to students. Staff found the guidance and support about all aspects of evaluation helpful including the support around the ethics procedures and information governance required.
Sharing practice	The sharing of good practice between schools and colleges as described above was particularly valued.

The main challenges to engagement in the programme

The schools and colleges also identified several challenges faced during the programme, many of which are interlinked.

Table 11: Challenges

Challenge	How schools and colleges were affected
Survey fatigue	Although the survey was one of the key benefits of the programme, colleagues reflected that repeated use of surveys could reduce engagement, especially when other surveys were happening alongside that used in the programme. Being clear about the rationale for the data collection and providing feedback on results using a 'you said, we did' format were suggested as possible solutions.
Staffing issues	School staff without protected time for their wellbeing role found it difficult to maintain engagement. Staff turnover was high for some settings and it took time for new staff to become familiar with the programme and develop the skills more longstanding members had acquired. A potential solution may be training or materials to support staff new into the role.
Maintaining momentum	Colleagues reflected that it was sometimes difficult to maintain the momentum of the programme due to staff changes, the coronavirus pandemic and competing priorities. Internal communications could be used to maintain awareness among staff and students.
Coronavirus pandemic	While it was not possible for the evaluation team to circumvent this, it was noted that not all wellbeing interventions were transferable to an online format during the coronavirus pandemic so in some cases evaluations had to stop and restart at a later date. In response to the pandemic and the increased workload school staff faced, the Anna Freud Centre reprioritised our work, including providing additional space to share learning and make connections with colleagues from other settings.
Embedding evaluation	Teacher capacity and prioritisation were outlined as key challenges to embedding evaluation. A focus on 'why we are doing this' and 'why is it important' may help, but prioritisation from senior leadership allowing protected time would also be welcome.

Choosing resources

Schools and colleges reflected that often education settings are 'bombarded' with wellbeing intervention and evaluation resources and struggle to know which are the most appropriate in the time they have available. While the Anna Freud Centre's direction to evidence-based resources and sharing of learning across settings had helped with the selection of interventions that were appropriate, often time is needed to review and absorb when considering new interventions and capacity to do this remains an issue. Therefore, even where resources are available to guide practice, it is important that schools and colleges sufficiently prioritise wellbeing within the school, allowing protected time and resources for both planning and delivering such activities.

Future mental health and wellbeing support

Moving forward, school and college staff made a number of suggestions about areas for future support.

Table 12: Future support

Type of support	What it involves
Peer network	Continuation of a face-to-face peer network to share experiences, resources and good practice.
Training	Training of senior staff to improve line management in order to support staff wellbeing.
Supporting a range of provision in schools and colleges	Schools want to have a greater emphasis on universal preventative work to help build student resilience and emotional literacy, alongside providing a range of middle level support (sub specialist/CAMHS support) to help students self-regulate and cope with everyday challenges, including dedicated support for some student groups, in particular the LGBTQI+ community.
Leadership	Work with leadership teams to improve the support offered to staff and encourage full backing to be given to the wellbeing lead. This may be achieved by involving the leadership teams in future wellbeing work or producing guidance specifically for this group.

Staff wellbeing	Prioritisation of support that tackled issues of staff wellbeing at a deeper level, e.g., better supervision and staff development, was important rather than wellbeing activities that were sometimes seen as superfluous.
Funding	Continued funding is needed for wellbeing lead roles and the interventions that have been shown to be working, including school counsellors.

What can the programme say about mental health and wellbeing interventions in schools?

Evidence tells us that a range of school-based interventions can promote wellbeing and support the prevention of mental health problems. Common features of effective interventions include those based on building social and emotional skills or those based on cognitive behavioural principles, those delivered by professionals or trained teachers, those delivered over a series of sessions and those designed to be engaging and interactive.^{9,10} However, research also tells us that even intervention programmes that have a strong evidence base can vary in their effectiveness depending on how they are implemented and how well they fit the context in which they are delivered. This means that even when choosing evidence-based interventions, schools and colleges cannot be certain that the support they are providing is effective in helping their students.

Ideally these interventions should be evaluated as they are being rolled out to ensure they are having the desired effect, but this can be challenging in terms of capacity and knowledge or skills to carry out an evaluation. Through the wellbeing programme carried out with The Mercers' Company Associated Schools and Colleges, we have been able to develop an approach which guides educational settings through practical steps to evaluate their own practice¹¹. We have used this approach to evaluate six interventions:

⁹ Clarke, A., Sorgenfrei, M., Mulcahy, J., Davie, P., Friedrich, C. & McBride, T. (2021). Adolescent mental health: A systematic review on the effectiveness of school-based interventions. Early Intervention Foundation. <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/adolescent-mental-health-a-systematic-review-on-the-effectiveness-of-school-based-interventions>

¹⁰ Public Health England and the Department for Education. (2021). Promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. A whole school or college approach. London. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1020249/Promoting_children_and_young_people_s_mental_health_and_wellbeing.pdf

- Mental health First Aid training for school staff in a secondary school
- A multi-strand wellbeing intervention in a primary school (including class-based teaching and a buddy system)
- .b mindfulness sessions for college students
- Learning mentors in a secondary school
- A targeted mindfulness intervention in a primary school
- Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) mentors in a primary school

While each of these evaluations involve relatively small numbers of children and young people, which make it difficult to generalise findings to other educational settings, they do demonstrate the feasibility of schools and colleges to undertake their own evaluations alongside drawing on the best available evidence about effective support. It also demonstrates practical steps that schools can carry out this kind of approach to improve and refine their own practice.

How has the programme contributed to wider learning?

During the course of this programme, a number of key learning points have emerged, which have been shared with wider audiences.

As described above, the in-depth evaluations highlight to wider audiences the importance of context, implementation and evaluating programmes in situ to understand impact, as well as providing examples of how this might be done. In addition, in the early stages of the programme, a wellbeing measurement framework for secondary schools was already available, but coproduction with Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges and their students led to the development of parallel surveys for use in primary schools and FE colleges. These tools have been shared widely with other educational professionals through our 30,000-strong Schools in Mind network and through conferences.

These surveys and the demonstration of their feasibility through implementation in the current programme (and allied programmes) have informed further approaches rolled out in Greater Manchester¹² and via the Child Outcomes Research Consortium.¹³ They have also informed further discussions with policy makers about wellbeing measurement in schools – something now being piloted by the Department for Education – and the

¹¹ Evidence Based Practice Unit (2022) Evaluating programmes to support pupil mental health and wellbeing: examples from schools and colleges working with the Mercers' Company. EBPB briefing note. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/sites/evidence_based_practice_unit/files/mercerssynthesisreport_final.pdf

¹² <https://gmbeewell.org/>

¹³ <https://www.corc.uk.net/for-schools/wellbeing-measurement-for-schools/>

importance of this in the development of a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

Another key aspect of the programme has been considering how the voice of children and young people can be prioritised in planning support for mental health and wellbeing. In particular, in hearing from young people about what they find useful and what can be improved, as demonstrated through the in-depth evaluations, and in terms of discussing wellbeing survey findings and how these can be used to understand students' strengths and needs.¹⁴ Our experience is that when schools do rollout wellbeing surveys, students often get missed out of discussions around the findings and how these might inform support offered in school, so our guidance developed through this programme gives schools practical tools to engage children and young people in this process.

Conclusion and reflections

Over the last six years, a lot has changed in the lives of children and young people and the impact on mental health and wellbeing is well documented. Schools and colleges are committing significant effort to ensuring they support the emotional needs of their students as well as the educational needs. Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges are an excellent example of this commitment, with clear examples of targeted and whole-system support provided. We hope this report demonstrates how additional support for schools and colleges can encourage the sharing of good practice and encourage the improvement of support provided.



¹⁴ Evidence Based Practice Unit. (2022) Engaging students with wellbeing survey findings. EBPB briefing note. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/sites/evidence_based_practice_unit/files/Mercers'_engagingstudentswellbeingsurveyfindings.pdf

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