Wellbeing@School: Using self-review to build a safe and caring school climate

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Key points:

- The Wellbeing@School (W@S) website aims to support schools to develop a safe and caring climate that deters bullying
- A positive school climate is related to enhanced academic and social outcomes for young people
- W@S is based on systems-thinking ideas about how schools work and how change happens
- W@S provides schools with a self-review process and tools to collect data from students and teachers that can be used as one starting point to develop plans for change

Introduction

This article provides an overview of the Wellbeing@School (W@S) website and toolkit and discusses how schools might make use of the tools and processes the site offers to engage in self-review. The article summarises some of the key ideas from the research literature that were used to develop the W@S tools and processes.

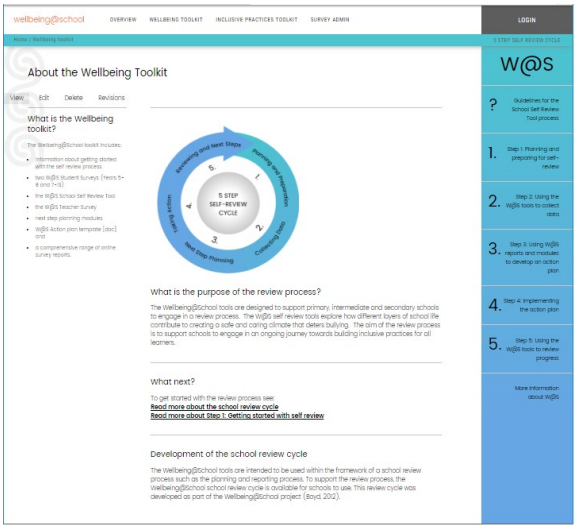
What is Wellbeing@School and what does it offer schools?

Wellbeing@School (W@S) is a website that offers the leaders of primary, intermediate, and secondary schools access to tools, resources, and processes to support self-review. This self-review explores the extent to which students and teachers perceive school practices to be promoting a safe and caring climate that deters bullying. Therefore the main focus of W@S is on supporting schools to promote **social wellbeing**.

W@S was developed by a team of staff at NZCER and is funded by the Ministry of Education as part of the Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) action plan.[1] One focus of this plan is on providing extra support to schools to make data-based decisions.

[1] http://pb4l.tki.org.nz/About-PB4L

At the heart of the W@S site (see image) are two main self-review tools – one tool is for staff, and one for students. These tools are designed to assist schools to collect robust data that will enable them to base decisions on feedback from the main people they are serving – the learners or students.



The **Student Survey** measures the extent to which students perceive that a safe and caring climate is modelled across different aspects of school life. The Student Survey has two parallel forms: a Year 5 to 8 survey for senior primary students, and a Year 7 to 13 survey for intermediate and secondary students.

The **School Self-Review Tool (SSRT)** is designed to be completed by a self-review team of school leaders, teachers, students, parents and whānau in a way that promotes discussion. The SSRT measures the extent to which the review team perceives that school practices model a safe and caring climate. The SSRT includes an online survey for teachers, which contains a subset of the questions in the full SSRT. The Teacher Survey gives the self-review team information about teachers' perspectives on school life. The self-review team then use this information, as well as the data from students, to help complete the SSRT.

The tools are intended to be used in a formative way as part of an ongoing self-review process. Term 2 is a good time to use the tools, as by this time, staff and students will have developed a feel for the social climate of the school. Schools are able to access the surveys and online data reports to assist in developing a vision for change and to plan next steps. The W@S site also includes resources such as an action planning template and ideas for next steps.[2]

Developing the Wellbeing@School tools and processes

The W@S tools and processes are underpinned by research. Both tools are the product of an extensive development process that culminated in a national trial of the tools in September 2011. The first step in the development process was a literature review. This review explored the findings from current international overview studies (that is, literature reviews, meta-analyses and syntheses) which summarised the state of play in regard to anti-bullying initiatives in schools and approaches to promoting a safe and caring school climate.

To add a New Zealand perspective, the findings from key New Zealand studies were also explored. The literature review includes information about approaches, such as restorative practices, that are grounded in kaupapa Māori ways of working, and have an emerging evidence base. The findings

[2] http://www.wellbeingatschool.org.nz/step-3-next-step-planning

from this literature overview are presented in full in Boyd (2012)[3] and summarised in Boyd and Barwick (2011).[4]

The next section of this article summarises some of the key messages from the literature that were used to develop the W@S tools and processes.

Why is a safe and caring climate important in schools?

What is school climate?

W@S focuses on exploring the different aspects of **"school climate"** that the literature suggests contribute to students' social wellbeing. However, researchers note there is **no common definition of what school climate actually is** (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; O'Malley, Katz, Renshaw, & Furlong, 2012; Tableman, 2004). This term is usually used to describe people's subjective experiences of school life and the "feel" or "morale" of a school. Most definitions of school climate are multidimensional which assists us to consider a school as a system with interacting layers. Cohen and Greier (2010) identify four components that are common to most definitions:

- **safety** (e.g., rules and norms promote social and physical safety)
- **relationships** (e.g., the school promotes caring and connectedness, respect for diversity, as well as effective relationships with parents and whānau)
- **teaching and learning** (e.g., the learning environment promotes and supports learning for all students)
- **physical environment** (e.g., is looked after and promotes a sense of community).

Why is school climate important?

Providing a caring, safe, and respectful school climate in which learning can flourish is a key priority for New Zealand educators. This need is reflected in the National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) for schools. NAG 5(i) states that each school board of trustees "… is expected to provide a safe physical and emotional environment for students."

There is a growing evidence base that shows an association between **positive perceptions of school climate** and **improved outcomes for students and teachers.** O'Malley et al. (2012) have summarised the international evidence (see text box). They note that a positive climate is connected to **academic success** as well as **student and staff wellbeing**. They also note that student and teacher perceptions of school climate are related to each other.

For **students**, positive perceptions of school climate are associated with:
- higher levels of academic motivation, achievement and success at school
- increased prosocial attitudes and behaviours (e.g., caring, including, helping)
- feelings of enjoyment, safety and connectedness to school
- lower levels of risky and aggressive behaviours.

For **teachers**, positive perceptions of school climate are associated with:
- higher levels of teacher efficacy, job satisfaction, productivity and retention
- thoroughness in implementing new initiatives
- lower levels of reported burnout.

(Summarised from O'Malley et al., 2012)

[3] http://www.wellbeingatschool.org.nz/sites/default/files/Wellbeing-at-School-overview-paper.pdf

[4] http://www.nzcer.org.nz/pdfs/wellbeing-brochure.pdf

The Youth '07 survey of New Zealand students and staff provides some New Zealand data about the climate in secondary schools (Denny, Robinson, Milfont, & Grant, 2009). This study showed that perceptions of school climate varied widely between schools and were related to school type, size and decile. Teachers and students from small-sized girls' schools tended to give better ratings of school climate than their peers at other schools. There were few differences by school decile. The researchers also found that students reported different patterns compared to staff. The Youth '07 data also showed marked differences between schools in relation to students' perceptions of safety and the extent to which bullying behaviour occurred (Denny et al., 2009). Students at different types of schools also reported considerable variation in whether they considered teachers or other students took action to stop bullying. This information suggests that, in New Zealand, there is considerable variation in students' experiences of safety at school, and that some schools have successfully built a safe and caring climate.

Using systems thinking to develop W@S tools and processes

Most of the literature suggests that systems thinking concepts are a helpful lens to consider how schools can to create a safe and caring climate that deters bullying behaviour (see the text box for key systems thinking ideas as applied to schools).

Systems thinking is not a new idea in the education sector. Well-known writers such as Peter Senge (2000) and Michael Fullan (2005, 2007) draw on systems thinking to describe how schools work and can build their capacity to self-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.

Systems thinking ideas

- Each school is a **system with different interacting layers** (e.g., school-wide climate and practices form one layer, classroom practice is another)
- The sum is greater than the parts (each **layer of the system influences others**)
- To support change, **different strategies are needed for the different layers**
- Through feedback loops, **systems learn and change** (e.g., adapt or self-improve), but this can be unpredictable or via multiple pathways
- Change in a system is **cyclical** rather than linear (e.g., not a simple cause and effect relationship)
- Each **school system is nested within wider systems that can support or impede change** (e.g., the education system, local community, or wider society)

Systems thinking and bullying behaviour

Systems-thinking is increasingly being used to address social concerns by viewing "problems" as parts of an overall system, rather than resulting from a single source or explanation. There is growing agreement among researchers that systems thinking is helpful in conceptualising bullying behaviour and in thinking about solutions (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Early explanations viewed bullying as a personality characteristic or learned family behaviour. More recent explanations consider the role the wider social environment and the systems that surround children play in shaping behaviour. Current explanations describe bullying behaviour as a

> … systemic group process involving bullies, victims, peers, adults, parents, school environments, and home environments. (p.86, Vreeman & Carroll, 2007)

This explanation acknowledges that 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 behaviour such as **bullying is a systemic problem, it requires a systemic solution**. 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 explore ways to work towards positive outcomes such as building students' strategies for managing their social and emotional wellbeing (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010).

One systemic solution which shows evidence of success is a **multifaceted approach** that includes a range of strategies that target the different layers of school life (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). This evidence shows that **approaches with more strategies tend to be more successful,** and 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).

Multifaceted approaches to creating change in school settings are called "*whole school approaches"*. Many schools are involved in whole school professional learning or have activities that are common across the school (that is, 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 is a systems-based way of viewing a school. Whole school approaches that are designed for the purposes of health promotion tend to have two key parts. One is a **way of thinking** about schools as a system and the other is a **way of working towards change** in school settings. The content of the W@S tools draws on this **way of thinking**, and the W@S self-review cycle is based on this **way of working**.

A) A way of thinking about schools

A whole school approach views each school as a multidimensional and interactive system that can learn and change. Whole school approaches commonly define different dimensions or layers of school life. Different strategies are needed to ensure these different layers are health promoting. This multifaceted approach is based on the premise that change is more likely to happen if consistent approaches and messages are promoted across layers. Therefore schools can plan to align the different activities in each layer to ensure they support and build on each other.

The table below shows the different layers 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 safe and caring climate that deters bullying. Many of these different layers and strategies are explored in the W@S tools.

Table 1 **Multifaceted strategies for building a safe and caring climate***

School-wide climate and practices

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 (i.e., 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.

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' social and emotional competencies.
- School professional learning processes are effective.

Community partnerships

- The school provides information and training to parents and whānau about school approaches.
- The school works in partnership with parents and whānau to improve social and emotional wellbeing at school.
- The school makes strategic connections with community groups, health and education professionals and external providers with the aim of improving social and emotional wellbeing at school.

Student culture and strategies

- Students are supported to develop a caring and positive peer culture.
- Students are encouraged to show a respect for others' cultures and backgrounds.
- Students are supported to learn strategies for managing their emotions and behaviour (including social problem solving and help seeking).

* Adapted from page 9 of Boyd and Barwick (2011).

The Wellbeing@School aspects: A systems-map of a school

To support schools to explore these different layers of the W@S tools are designed to explore common **aspects** of school life that are associated with a safe and caring school climate. Five main aspects are explored. Four of these relate to positive practices and behaviours:

- school-wide climate and practices
- teaching and learning
- community partnerships
- pro-social student culture and strategies.

The fifth aspect, aggressive student culture, explores the extent to which aggressive and bullying behaviours occur at school. Most of the aspects are further divided into sub-aspects that explore different dimensions of the main aspect. The main aspects and sup-aspects explored in the SSRT and Student Survey are show in table 2.[5]

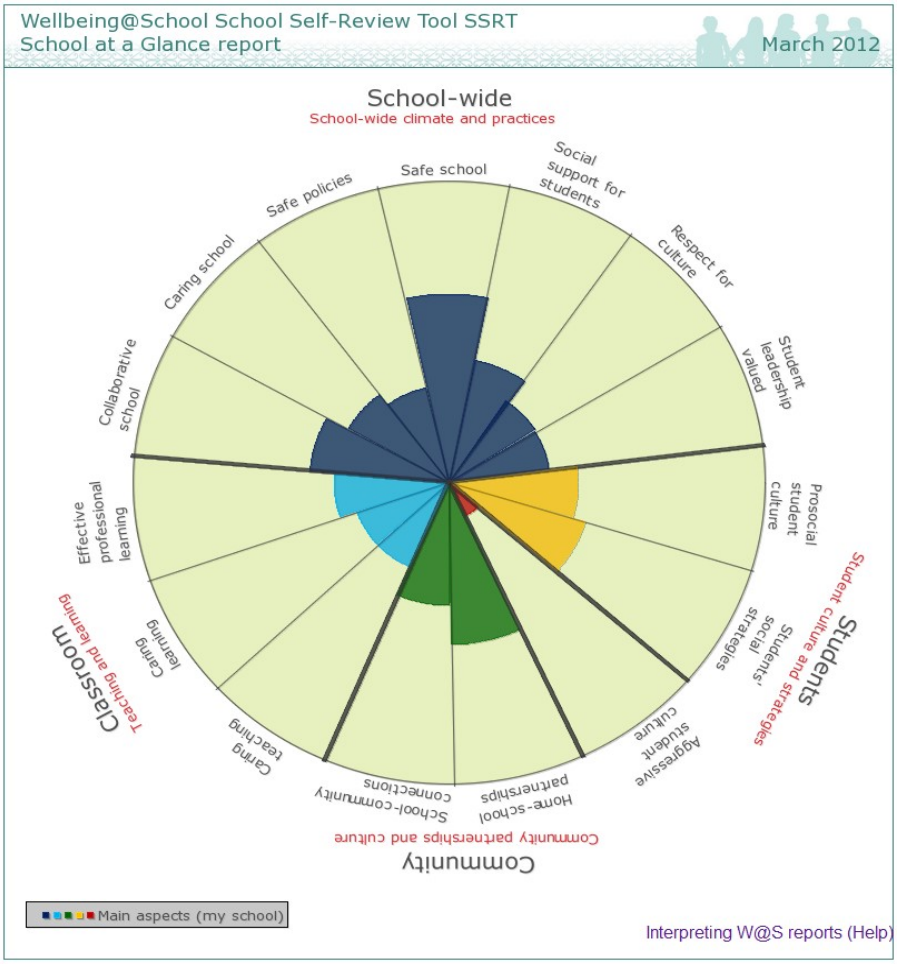
Table 2 **The aspects and sub-aspects of the SSRT and Student Survey**

Main *aspect*	SSRT *sub-aspects*	Student Survey *sub-aspects*
School-wide climate and practices	Collaborative school	Caring and collaborative school
	Caring school	
	Student leadership valued	
	Safe policies	Safe school
	Safe school	
	Social support for students	NA
	Respect for culture	Respect for culture
Teaching and learning	Caring teaching	Caring teaching
	Caring learning	Caring learning
	Effective professional learning	NA
Community partnerships	Home−school partnerships	Home−school partnerships
	School−community connections	NA
Pro-social student culture and strategies	Pro-social student culture	Pro-social student culture
	Students' social strategies	Students' social strategies
Aggressive student culture	Aggressive student culture	Aggressive student culture

The W@S data reports are also organised around these aspects and sub-aspects (as shown in Figure 1).

[5] Full descriptions of the focus of each sub-aspect can be found at: http://www.wellbeingatschool.org.nz/information-sheet/aspects-school-life-explored-ws

Figure 1 **Example of report from the School Self-Review Tool**



Schools can use the W@S reports to direct attention to possible areas of strength and next steps. Each main aspect of W@S is represented by a different coloured segment. Main aspects are broken down into sub-aspects. In general, if most of the segment is coloured in, this shows that there is a high level of agreement that this aspect is in place. If a segment is only coloured near the centre of the circle this shows there is a lower level of agreement that this aspect is in place. The aggressive student culture aspect is different from the others. A small segment indicates lower levels of aggressive behaviour.

The report above shows that there is a higher level of agreement that many of the practices relating to the sub-aspect “Safe school” are in place. There is less agreement that practices relating to the aspect “Teaching and learning” are in place. A similar “School at a glance” report is also produced from Student Survey data. More detailed reports by each aspect and survey question are also available from Student Survey data. The data in these reports can be used to suggest potential next steps or areas of school practice that could be strengthened.

B) A way of working towards change

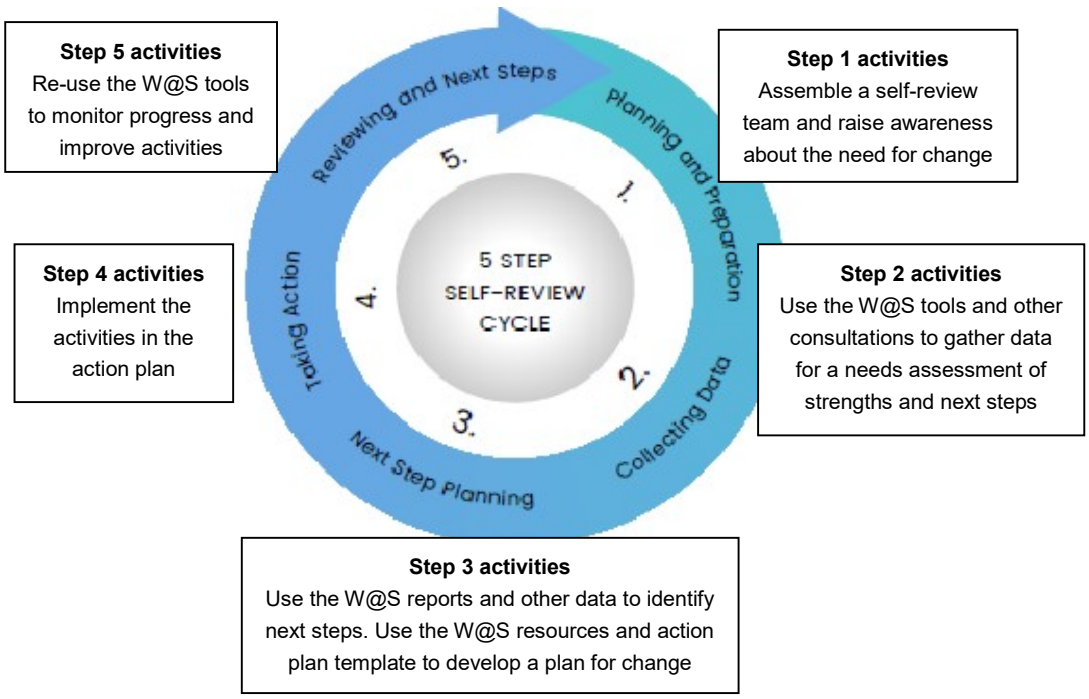
The second key part of a whole school approach is a **process for change**. Whole school approaches often use processes that are based on community development principles. Community development refers to the idea that **change is more likely to occur when the whole school**

community works together to develop a shared vision about what it wants to achieve, works to make the vision a reality and acts in ways that are consistent with that vision. Key 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, gather data to identify needs, create a shared vision and commit to action.

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 W@S tools are designed to be used as part of a self-review process that is 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.

The 5-step W@S self-review cycle (shown in figure 2) draws on action research and health promotion processes and aligns with messages in the NZ curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) about how curriculum design and review is an ongoing process. This diagram below shows how the W@S tools and resources can be used as part of this self-review cycle.

Figure 2 **The W@S self-review cycle**



Students as key stakeholders and leaders

In schools, students can often be positioned as the passive beneficiaries of change rather than resource people who can actively contribute to a change process (Fullan, 2007; Senge, 2010). 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 (HPE) learning area of the curriculum, and current research on health education in schools, both place emphasis on students actively **"learning for" their health and wellbeing through "learning by doing"** health promotion activities that improve their social and

physical environment. Similarly, the community development principles that underpin whole school approaches promote the idea that students can learn about health and wellbeing through being active citizens who are enabled to make meaningful changes to their social environment.

New Zealand studies show that opportunities for increased student involvement in decision-making and leadership activities can support change in schools. These approaches also have a range of benefits for students including an enhanced sense of connection to school and opportunities to build the key competencies (Boyd, 2011; Boyd & Watson, 2006; Hipkins, Cowie, Boyd, Keown, & McGee, 2011).

Drawing on these ideas, W@S sees students as active participants in the change process. The W@S Student Survey supports schools to gather data from student about their views of school life and use this information to plan for change.

Some common ways schools can enable students to take a more active role in "**learning for and about"** their health and wellbeing as they **"learn by doing"** are shown in the insert box. These are examples of the sorts of activities that are suggested in the literature and promoted in W@S resources.

Ways of enabling students to "learn for" their health and wellbeing

- **actively seek student perspectives** on school life (the W@S *Student Surveys* are designed to support this) and their ideas for improvements
- **include student representatives** on self-review or health and wellbeing teams
- **create opportunities within the curriculum programme for students to develop knowledge, skills and competencies to enhance wellbeing** (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 students)
- **enable students to take leadership roles that promote health and wellbeing** (e.g., students can show leadership through activities such as being buddies or mentors for new students)
- **adopt school-wide approaches to managing relationships and conflicts that engage students in acts of social problem solving** (e.g., approaches such as restorative conversations provide opportunities for learning and competency development).

What next: Where to start?

Managing changing in school settings is a long term endeavour. The W@S tools and processes use evidence and ideas from the literature to support schools to engage in an ongoing self-review process. One important point that emerges from the literature is that gaining the commitment of all stakeholders is vital. Other lessons and principles that have emerged from the literature overview are the need to:

- ***Undertake a self-review and needs assessment***. A process of self-review led by representatives of stakeholder groups can act to raise awareness about concerns, identify what is known already and assess what other information is needed.
- ***Involve all stakeholders in the process.*** Getting students, staff, and parents and whānau involved is integral to a self-review process as this provides new resource people, increases ownership over change and supports sustainability.
- ***Develop a plan of action with multiple components.*** Once information has been gathered, the next step is to develop an action plan which details actions for the next couple of years based on

what the review has shown about the needs in a school. A long-term focus is important as changes can take three to five years to embed.

- ***Consider the bigger picture***. Any approach that aims to create a safe and caring climate that deters bullying needs to fit with the school vision and focus on enhancing positive outcomes and building staff and students' skills and strategies.
- ***Develop plans to build students' leadership and social competencies.*** The plan for change needs to include a range of activities that draw on students' knowledge and leadership abilities and strengthen their social problem solving skills and competencies.
- ***Monitor change and make adjustments***. Needs assessment as part of a self-review process will provide some baseline data against which the effectiveness of strategies can be assessed. Change can be monitored over time and an iterative process can be used to adapt and improve the activities in the plan.

Notes

The W@S website is available free of charge for use by all New Zealand primary, intermediate, and secondary schools. A link to the registration page can be found at: http://www.wellbeingatschool.org.nz/

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