



## Schools Improvement Initiative Schools Wellbeing Centre

### Briefing Document 6 11 July 2019

#### **Background**

South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of income distribution. Cape Town, like all other South African cities is characterized by deep socio-economic inequalities with locked-in spatial structures, reflective of its apartheid past. Khayelitsha, a typical example of late-apartheid town planning, is located over 30 km from the city centre. The 450 000 inhabitants of Khayelitsha are therefore dislocated from the city's economic drivers which include major concentrations of work and industry. Unemployment in the township is high, particularly amongst the youth: more than 50% of young men up to the age of 23 are unemployed. The high levels of poverty and unemployment in Khayelitsha mirror persistent inequalities for the majority of black South Africans in all aspects: land, housing, health and education. Within the country at large, income poverty continues to be strongly associated with race: 65% of African youth live below the poverty line, as compared with just over 4% of white young people. The structural inequalities in South Africa are characterized by extreme disparities in the schooling system. Twenty years after apartheid, stark differences continue to exist in educational achievement, particularly with regards to literacy and numeracy levels between the wealthiest 25% of schools and the vast majority of schools serving largely poor black students.

In an effort to address some of the structural inequalities in the schooling system, the Schools Improvement Initiative (SII) was established in 2012 as one of the University of Cape Town's key strategic initiatives. The overarching aim of the Initiative since its inception has been to develop a strong, engaged university-school partnership between the university and a targeted group of schools in the Western Cape township of Khayelitsha.

#### **Learner wellbeing in schools**

The impact of poverty and inequality on young people living in low socio-economic status communities such as Khayelitsha is significant. Learners carry heavy psychosocial burdens as factors of their unequal and burdened contexts. Socio-economic issues of poverty, unemployment and inequality frequently manifest, especially for the youth in a range of psychological conditions such as depression; anxiety; low self morale; personal and interpersonal challenges; lack of motivation and high stress levels - ultimately resulting in poor school performance.

There is a growing body of evidence that highlights the importance of learner wellbeing in schools in terms of its impact on academic performance and optimal youth development. To reach their full potential, young people need nurturing care at all stages of their development. This is particularly critical in South Africa, with its demographically young and wealth-race inequality. To address the increasing demand for psychosocial support, in 2016 the SII introduced the Schools Wellbeing Centre (SWC) at one of its partner schools as a pilot intervention. In collaboration with Metropole East Education

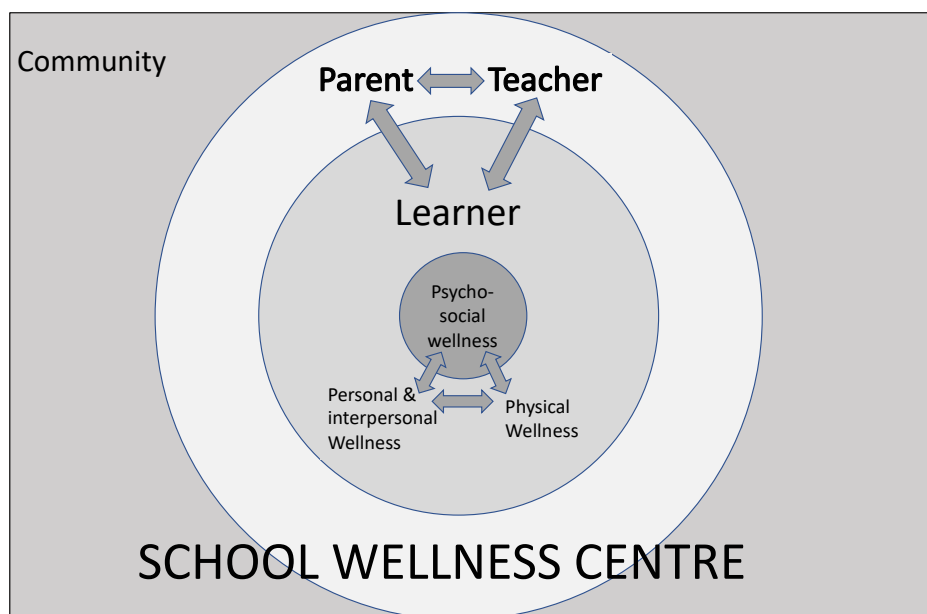
District, the primary aim of the Centre was to help learners build resilience, enhance self-esteem and deepen an understanding of themselves and others. The implementation of the Centre followed a feasibility study conducted in 2015 by a Masters student undertaking her degree in Public Health. The findings of the study showed that there was a strong need for learners from the school to receive psychosocial support. After piloting the SWC for a year, the programme was extended to an additional three SII partner schools during 2017 and 2018. The Centre is now fully operational in four schools.

As the first of its kind in Africa, the vision of the Centre has from its inception been to develop a model of excellence in school-based wellbeing by offering psychosocial support to learners at the SII partner schools through strong interdisciplinary and community-based collaboration. In realising this vision, the university has worked hand-in-hand with Metropole East Education District (MEED) officials, Khayelitsha-Eastern Substructure Metro District Health Services (KESS) and critically, all members of the school community.

At each of the four partner schools, the SWC occupies a separate physical space, where learners receive psychosocial, and other relevant support in order to manage their daily challenges and realise their capacity to make meaningful life decisions. Consultations take place on a voluntary basis, either through self-referral or referral by teachers. Through enhancing personal and interpersonal *wellbeing*, the aim of the SWC has been for learners to become more conscious of the benefits of a productive and balanced lifestyle, and to grow holistically into fully engaged adults and members of their community and broader society.

The focus of the SWC from the outset has been based on an approach to wellbeing that is integrated and holistic, and that addresses systemic obstacles, which function to inhibit the development of the whole being within the system of the family and community. Rather than being informed by a biomedical model, physical wellbeing is regarded as integral to psychosocial wellbeing, which in turn is connected to personal, developmental, societal and environmental wellbeing. The wellbeing of the individual is therefore intrinsically linked to that of the family and community.

This is depicted below:



## **Social worker**

A qualified social worker was appointed by UCT at the beginning of 2016 to coordinate the SWC, supervise social work students in their third and fourth years, and to provide psychosocial support to learners. Her role has been to support and empower school learners and their parents and/or guardians, helping them develop strategies to build resilience in managing their daily lives and equip them with tools to shift negative behavioural patterns.

The social worker currently divides her time between the four partner schools: offering individual psychosocial support to as many learners as possible who require support and replicating activities and programmes across these schools. This is made possible by the involvement of third and fourth year social work students from UCT. All students are supervised by the social worker and focus on group, and community work (third year students) and individual counselling (fourth year students). One of the focus areas of the students for example has been developing an anti-bullying campaign with the Grade 8's. At all four schools, learners' participation in programmes and campaigns is voluntary.

In 2017, a total of nine social work students were supervised. Ten were supervised in 2018 and this number has grown to 15 in 2019.

## **What's offered at the SWC?**

Over and above psychosocial support, collaboration takes place with a number of community-based organisations that focus on personal development, youth leadership, health and wellbeing. The conceptualisation and implementation of these interventions are based entirely on the needs of the learners and address issues such as:

- Gender-based violence
- Addiction and substance abuse
- Depression and anxiety
- Leadership development
- Interpersonal relationships
- Career choice and university admission processes
- Pregnancy, sexual health

In each of the above examples, age and content-relevant programmes are made available to specific grades. Decisions regarding participation of learners are informed by the appropriateness of the content for the particular age and grade. While some programmes are offered to smaller groups, others take place at the classroom level (such as during library sessions) where the social worker discusses relevant themes with the learners. The ability to reach larger numbers of learners through classroom-based discussions has resulted in this forum being particularly effective. In addition to individual counselling sessions, group sessions, classroom sessions and family reconstruction sessions, the SWC collaborates with a number of organisations outside of the immediate school context. This enables expertise from the community to be absorbed into the SWC. Partner organisations include:

- ***ChildLine:*** Capacitates learners by developing psychosocial interventions through peer support.
- ***SANCA:*** (South African National Council of Alcoholism & Drug Dependence) Capacitates teachers, parents and learners by addressing substance abuse.

- ***Khayelitsha Site B Youth Clinic: and MSF***: Screening for pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS is administered by trained staff in mobile clinics
- ***Empilweni: place of healing***. Capacitates learners to manage substance abuse and issues relating to mental health.
- ***Provincial Department of Health***: Sanitary pad project

### **Parent and teacher involvement**

Because parents are regarded as key to the emotional health and wellbeing of the child, family reconstruction therapy and group therapy sessions are also offered through the SWC. Parent workshops are organised in collaboration with the parent representatives on the School Governing Body and SLES (Specialised Learner and Educator Support) staff from the local Education District, with a focus on supporting their children in understanding adolescent behaviour.

Empowering parents and teachers with information that assists them in managing their children/learners is critical to the work of the Centre. This serves to deepen their understanding of their children/young adult's developmental stages as well as the accompanying emotional needs at each stage of development. Parent workshops also focus on general drug awareness (offered in collaboration with MEED, the Khayelitsha Youth Clinic and SANCA) and pregnancy awareness.

### **Conclusion**

The SWC represents a unique approach, and it is the first time anything of this nature has been implemented on the continent, as part of a university-school-community partnership. Significantly it has full support from the local Education Department, the Department of Health, the teachers and the parent communities from the respective schools. Support from education authorities (as evidenced by their involvement in ongoing workshops and in the quarterly Steering Committee meetings, for example) is critical in order for an intervention such as the SWC to be operational however this does not translate into financial support. Metropole East Education District authorities officially endorse the Center and regard it as an innovative and effective model to be used as best practice for other schools.

In 2018, **more than 500 learners** received direct psychosocial support from the social worker and social work students across the four schools – and many more received indirect support through their participation in the above-mentioned projects. **In 2019 between January and June, 298 learners received direct support and, indirectly, over 1560 learners received support through group and classroom-based sessions.**

### **What learners say:**

*Azile Salman, Grade 10:*

"I managed to connect to so many of my classmates through the classroom group sessions. I think I am understood better by the people around me because I was able to present who I was to everyone. Other learners were also sharing.

I think it helps people not feel alone or judged, it made me feel free".

*Amahle Mbetshu, Grade 10:*

"Having the Wellbeing Centre is really good. There wasn't anything like this at my previous school. Life can be so hard, I like that I got someone to talk to as soon as I asked for help at the school and I did not have to wait".

*Siyamthanda Satula, Grade 12:*

"The Wellbeing Centre has really assisted me with many challenges. I feel really good after having spoken to someone and that makes me look forward to school sometimes because I can always share what is going on in my life".

The Schools Wellbeing Centre transforms lives. It makes a difference. It aids wellbeing. It changes the horizon of what's possible for every learner. Our goal is to make the Schools Wellbeing Centre an integrated and enduring feature of schooling in Khayelitsha

**For more information on the SWC: see Daily Maverick Opinion Piece, 13 June 2019.**

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2019-06-13-legacy-of-youth-protest-sees-learners-scarred-by-mental-health-issues/>

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