

# Strengthening School Communities 2016-2019

Building teacher and school capacity to cope with disasters and other forms of collective trauma impacting the school community.

## Multiple methods



Analysis of Victorian NAPLAN 2011 and 2013 data (n= 24,642) to guide teachers in relation to post trauma student impacts



Educational workforce interviews (n=10), representing schools, Department of Education & Training, & School Support Service staff to identify disaster preparedness training & trauma needs support.



Upgrade and pilot of the online teacher training program – Skills for Psychological Recovery (SPR-T)

## Results

Primary school students in **schools in bushfire affected** areas showed **reduced academic progress** in reading and numeracy two to four years later.



**Citation:** Gibbs L, Nurse J, Cook J, Ireton G, Alkemade N, Roberts M, Gallagher H.C, Bryant R, Block K, Molyneaux R, Forbes D. Delayed disaster impacts on academic performance of primary school children. *Child Development* (2019) <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.13200>

There were **changed demands** on school staff in post disaster school communities:



an increased emphasis on student wellbeing



additional support to families

School staff were at **risk of reduced mental health** and wellbeing from their **own disaster exposure** and vicarious trauma experienced through supporting children and families.

School staff tended to prioritise student and family needs above their own self-care.



**[Self-care is] so hard to do when you're thrust into that position because you know that you should be looking after yourself but you know your prime thing is to look after everybody else.**

The SPR-T review identified that an adjusted approach is required for future disaster events that more adequately addresses teacher support needs (see study recommendations).

## Impacts

Publication in *Child Development*, a leading international children's health journal

Victorian State Government decision to invest **\$1million** in State Government funding for **additional programs** to support bushfire affected school communities

State government invested an additional **\$200,000** in further research about longer term academic impacts

The recommendations will be released and widely disseminated to ensure teacher health and support needs are addressed in future disasters

# Supporting School Staff Post-Disaster

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to guide support for school staff following a major natural disaster or mass trauma event. They draw on the collective findings from the Strengthening School Communities study and provide a proposal for best practice.

These recommendations may draw on existing supports or require new services. They are not exclusive of other needs and related supports that students, teachers and parents may require including offline programmes and support, and flexibility in delivery and reporting. The term 'educational settings' is used to signify a range of potential settings including preschools, primary schools, secondary schools and tertiary education settings:



1. Provide all staff in disaster affected educational settings with an intensive support program delivered locally **before students return** which includes:

- Establishment of a supportive workplace culture
- Key principles for **supporting students** who have experienced trauma, grief or loss
- Guide to the unique **impacts** of place-based disaster events
- **Self-care strategies** for teachers, principals and other staff in educational settings.



2. Use current **evidence-informed programs** to inform the content of the intensive disaster response program offered to educational staff.



3. Revisit and extend the **intensive professional staff support program** at key intervals (for example: 1 month, 3 months, 6 months, 12 months, 2 years, 5 years and/or at key milestones or anniversaries) to address emerging issues and support staff capacity over time.



4. Offer **regular wellbeing checks**, potentially conducted by the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), to all school staff impacted by disasters as a way of destigmatising help seeking.



5. **Monitor staff support needs** and **refer** individual staff to trauma-informed interventions where appropriate.



6. Appoint **additional teaching and support staff** and/or volunteers (potentially seconded or invited out of retirement) to educational settings as needed in the years following the disaster event to **help meet the extra administrative, social, emotional and learning** demands.



7. Adjust **departmental administrative requirements and timelines** for disaster affected educational settings to acknowledge the additional demands on staff and students.



8. Conduct research to **assess the feasibility, outcomes and impacts** of this adjusted approach for staff involved in supporting disaster recovery in educational communities.



9. Conduct research to **explore the different issues** experienced by staff and students in different types of educational setting affected by disasters.