

Teaching girls to thrive:

Why explicit wellbeing education matters more than ever



By **Kylie McCullah**, *Principal, Loreto College Marryatville, SA*

As adolescent mental health challenges rise and academic pressures intensify, wellbeing is no longer a nice-to-have in schools; it is essential. Principal Kylie McCullah shares how Loreto College Marryatville is leading the way through its award-winning SEAD program, proving that when girls are explicitly taught to thrive socially, emotionally and academically, they excel in every dimension of life.

There is a growing truth that schools can no longer ignore: academic success is not enough. In an age of anxiety, comparison culture and digital overload, students, especially girls, need more than content

knowledge to thrive. They need tools for strength, empathy, regulation, identity, and confidence. They need to know how to navigate the world, not just understand it. And this cannot be left to chance.

As Principal of Loreto College Marryatville, an all-girls independent school in South Australia, I have seen the transformative impact of what happens when wellbeing is not assumed but taught—explicitly and thoughtfully. This is not a matter of feel-good initiatives or one-off assemblies; it is core educational business!

The challenge for girls

In all-girls schools, we see both the potential and the pressure that young women face. We witness their leadership, their drive, their empathy, and also their self-doubt, perfectionism, and fear of failure. Girls are statistically more likely to internalise stress, overachieve at the expense of their wellbeing,



This is not a matter of feel-good initiatives or one-off assemblies; it is core educational business

and struggle with imposter syndrome. They often aim for excellence, but fear falling short.

This is compounded by a world where social media curates idealised versions of life, appearance, and success. Girls absorb powerful messages about who they are supposed to be, how they should look, and what they must achieve.

That is why we teach wellbeing explicitly. Because when girls are taught to understand themselves, value their voices, and develop healthy

emotional habits, they do not just cope—they flourish.

The SEAD program: Leading with purpose

At Loreto College Marryatville, our Social, Emotional and Academic Development (SEAD) program is not an adjunct; it is foundational. SEAD recognises that emotional health, strong relationships, and academic confidence are all deeply intertwined. When one is neglected, all suffer.



Image courtesy of Loreto College Marryatville



Images courtesy of Loreto College Marryatville

The SEAD program was born out of a simple but powerful conviction: that student wellbeing deserves the same rigour, attention and planning as academic subjects. Designed to be delivered weekly from ELC to Year 12, SEAD provides age-appropriate, research-informed lessons that empower our students to understand their emotions, their development and their social world.

The SEAD curriculum is designed to grow with our students, covering key themes

such as identity, emotional intelligence, leadership and voice, healthy relationships, academic strategies, responsible online engagement, and preparation for life beyond school. Each topic is carefully selected to build a holistic sense of self and equip girls with the tools they need to thrive both personally and academically.

The program is supported by professional development for staff, parent education sessions, and embedded practices across the school day.

This year, SEAD was nationally recognised with an Excellence in Wellbeing Education Award for the third time. But its true success is not in accolades—it’s in the stories of our students and the benefit it brings them.

As one Year 12 student shared: “Loreto creates a safe, happy, and welcoming environment where everyone feels valued and encouraged to be themselves. It inspires confidence and encourages you to follow your aspirations while supporting and uplifting others to do the same.”

Why explicit teaching matters

Wellbeing is often described as a school’s hidden curriculum. But at Loreto, we believe it should be anything but hidden. If we want students to develop courage, compassion, and confidence, we must teach these skills with the same clarity we use to teach algebra or Shakespeare.

Girls need explicit permission, and language, to name their feelings, assert their needs, and rewrite unhelpful self-narratives. They benefit from structured opportunities to reflect, challenge stereotypes, and build social-emotional skills with intent.

Consider the topic of self-advocacy. Many girls hesitate to speak up, whether to challenge unfairness, seek help, or express a boundary. But after a SEAD lesson on assertiveness, one Year 11 student commented: “Loreto encourages us to take risks, share our ideas openly, and develop our leadership skills in a way that feels authentic and empowering.

That is the power of explicit wellbeing education. ▶





years, especially as it fosters meaningful connections and personal growth. The school's values of justice, sincerity, felicity, verity, and freedom have shaped my confidence and passion, encouraging me to break free from gender stereotypes and explore my interests through a wide range of empowering opportunities.

Looking forward: Wellbeing as core business

The world our students are inheriting is volatile, fast-paced, and complex. Students need more than content knowledge to thrive. They need emotional agility, ethical awareness, and the courage to care deeply—for themselves, for others, and for the world.

As a school, we cannot wait for issues to arise and react, our approach must be proactive. Wellbeing cannot be a fringe benefit. It must be deliberately taught, regularly evaluated, and deeply embedded in how we define a successful education.

At Loreto College Marryatville, we are proud to be leading this work through SEAD. We are committed to growing young women who are not only intellectually capable and confident, but emotionally intelligent, ethically grounded, and spiritually alive.

In the words of our foundress Mary Ward: "Women in time to come will do much."

And when we teach them how to care for their minds, hearts, and souls, there is no limit to what they will do. ■

◀ Culture is curriculum

SEAD is not just a program—it is a culture. And culture starts with staff. At Loreto, we invest in our educators as the frontline of student wellbeing. Through training including trauma-informed practice and adolescent development, our staff are equipped to recognise distress early and respond with care and consistency.

We also focus on adult wellbeing. A staff culture of kindness, reflection, and shared responsibility has a ripple effect. Students pick up on authenticity. They notice when a teacher genuinely listens, when expectations are clear, and when feedback is given with belief in their potential.

A Year 11 student recently commented: "Loreto provides an amazingly supportive environment in which all students are actively encouraged to reach their full potential."

Data: Our compass for action

One of the cornerstones of SEAD's success is our use of data. Measuring wellbeing

may seem difficult, but it's not optional. At Loreto College Marryatville, we use regular student surveys, wellbeing check-ins, and behavioural data to track how students are doing and what they need.

In addition to the weekly Pulse surveys, we conduct two annual wellbeing surveys to better understand and support our students. The Social-Emotional Wellbeing (SEW) survey by ACER is completed by all year levels, while students in Years 10 to 12 also take part in the national Mission Australia Youth Survey. These surveys gather valuable insights into students' confidence, emotional regulation, sense of belonging, and willingness to seek help. The results inform the development of SEAD lessons and help us monitor the impact of our wellbeing initiatives over time.

The distinctiveness of girls' schools

There is unique power in an all-girls education. Free from gendered classroom dynamics, girls in this setting are more likely to take intellectual risks, engage in leadership, and define success on their own terms.

But we must also be aware of the unique pressures that girls carry. At Loreto, we embrace both the opportunity and the obligation to speak directly to girls' experiences. Our wellbeing curriculum includes frank discussions on body image, social comparison, imposter syndrome, and relational aggression. We normalise vulnerability and model emotional honesty.

As one Year 12 student shared: "There is an incredible sense of sisterhood at Loreto—it's a space where I feel confident to be myself, free from pressure or comparison. I've grown not only academically, but personally, surrounded by girls who lift each other up instead of competing."

And we ground it all in our Loreto values: justice, sincerity, verity, felicity and freedom. These values don't sit on a poster, they guide our pedagogy, policies, and wellbeing care.

As a Year 12 student reflects, these values are deeply woven into the fabric of her school experience: "What I love most about Loreto is the strong sense of sisterhood and community, which I've come to deeply appreciate during my senior



Images courtesy of Loreto College Marryatville, SA