



Optimising Evaluations of Wellbeing Programs in Schools

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19 September 2024

aes24 International Evaluation Conference

Acknowledgement of country



We wish to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, Traditional Custodians of the land on which we are gathering today, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who continue to contribute to our work to improve Indigenous learning, education and research.

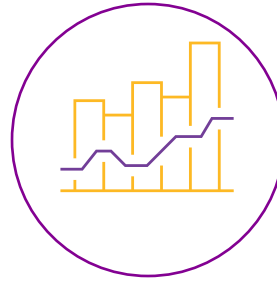
About ACER



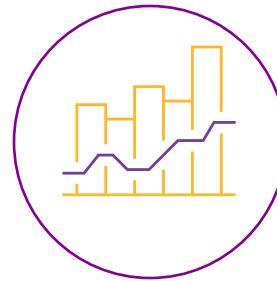
10 offices
worldwide



480+
Employees



150+
Research projects per year



127+
Evaluations to date

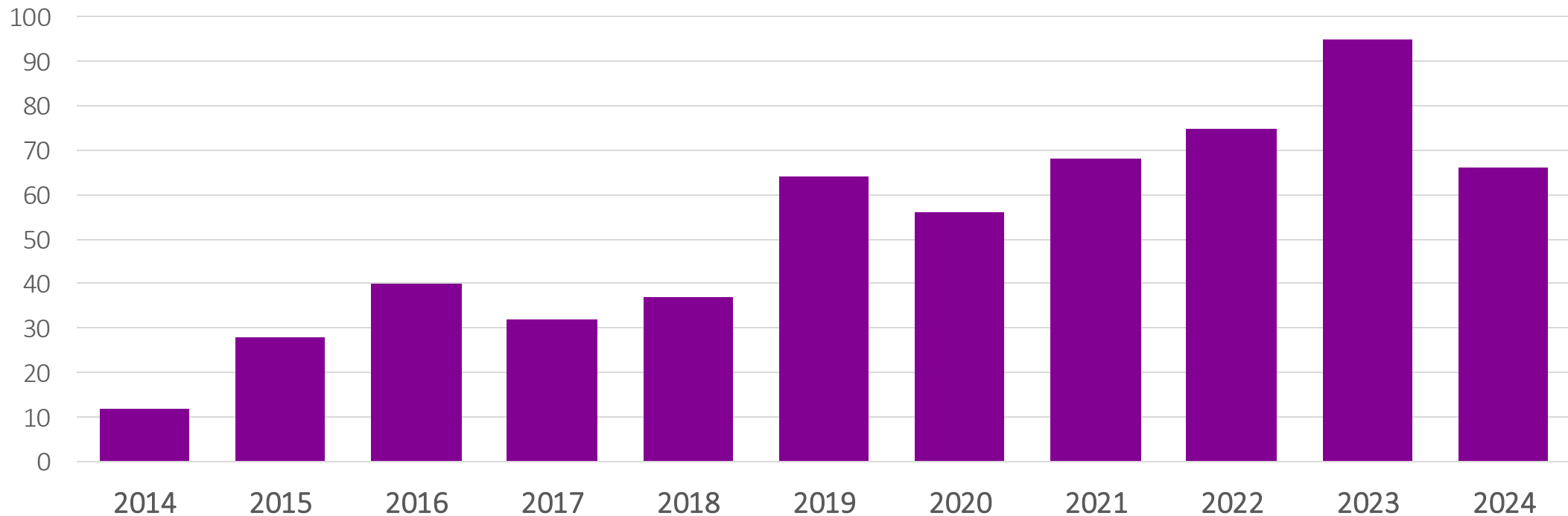
www.acer.org/au/research

Who we work with...



Evaluation opportunities over the last 10 years

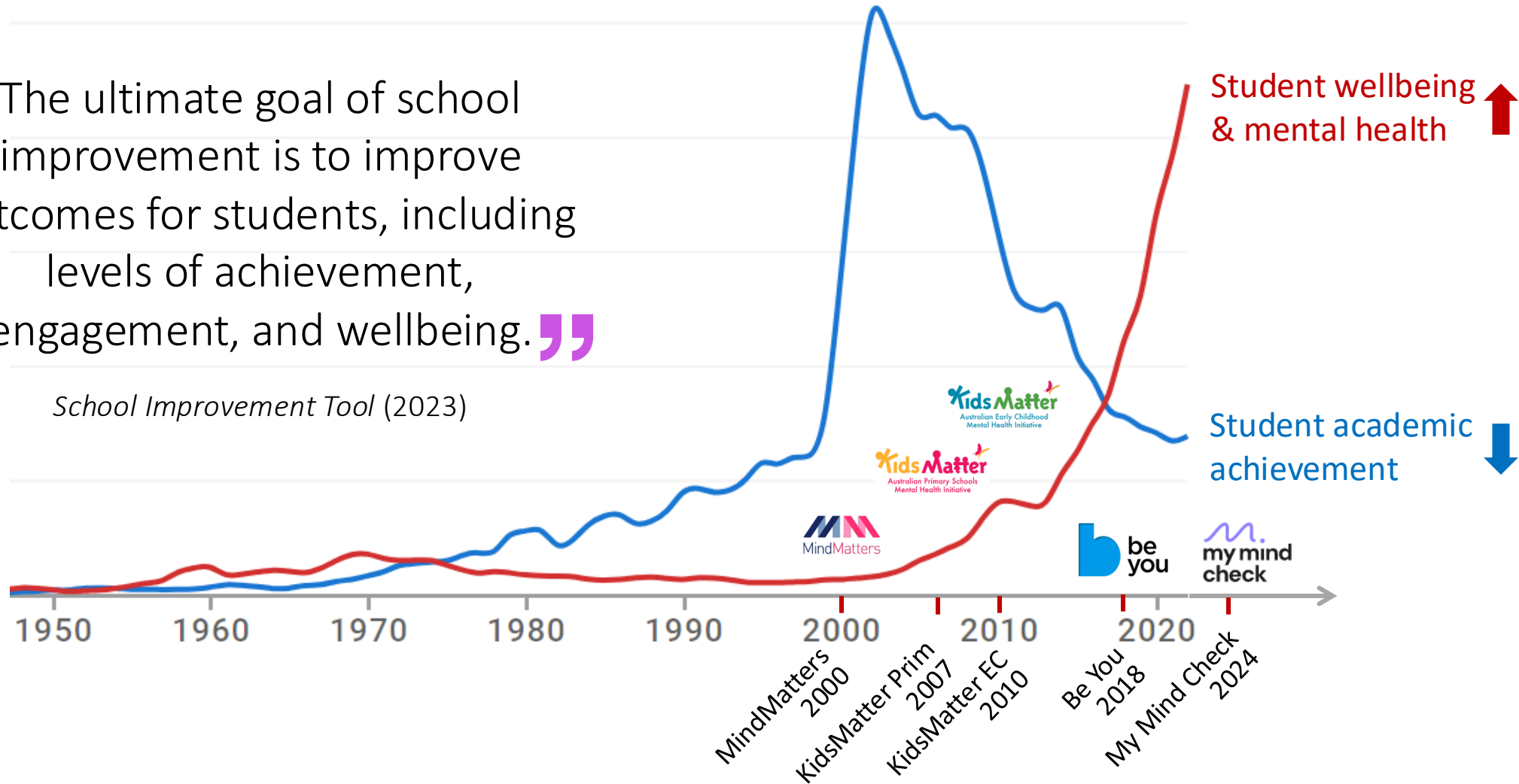
Number of education-related tenders identified each year



Investment in Wellbeing Initiatives in Australia

“ The ultimate goal of school improvement is to improve outcomes for students, including levels of achievement, engagement, and wellbeing. ”

School Improvement Tool (2023)



Source: Google Books [Ngram Viewer](#)

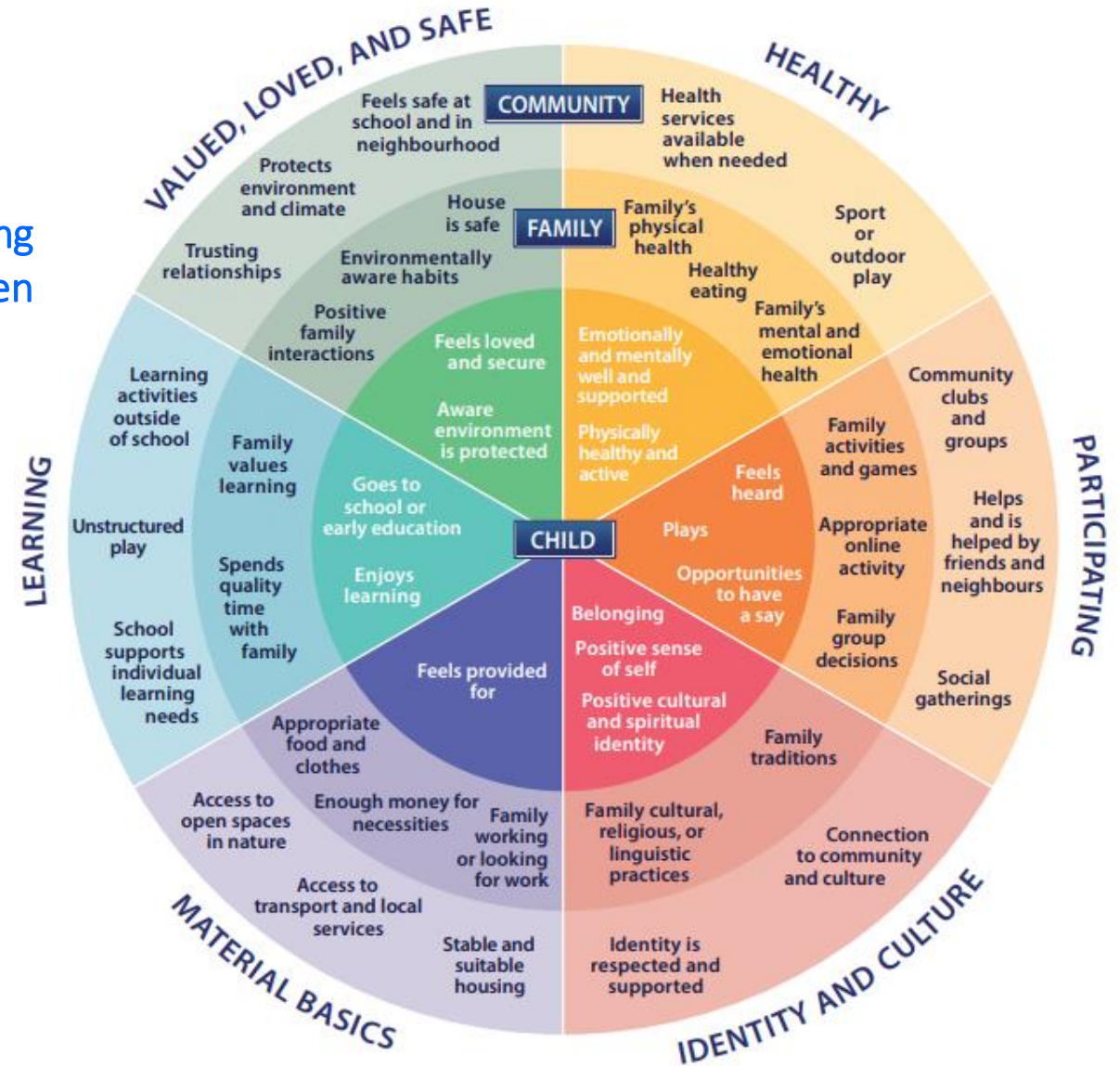
School Improvement Tool, 2023, <https://www.acer.org/au/research/school-improvement-tool>

About wellbeing programs

What is wellbeing?

ARACY's Wellbeing Wheel for Children

- “Wellbeing encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose.” (WHO, 2024)
- “A sense of satisfaction, happiness, effective social functioning and spiritual health, and dispositions of optimism, openness, curiosity and resilience.” (ACARA, n.d.)



Success factors for whole-school wellbeing

- “ Australian schools support student wellbeing by:
- Having a safe, supportive and respectful environment
 - Encouraging resilience
 - Developing confidence
 - Building healthy relationships and social bonds
- ”

AG Department of Education (2024)



[https://www.aisnsw.edu.au/Resources/WAL%204%20\[Open%20Access\]/Six%20Key%20Factors%20for%20Whole-school%20Wellbeing%20Success.pdf](https://www.aisnsw.edu.au/Resources/WAL%204%20[Open%20Access]/Six%20Key%20Factors%20for%20Whole-school%20Wellbeing%20Success.pdf)
<https://www.education.gov.au/student-resilience-and-wellbeing>

Programs vary widely...



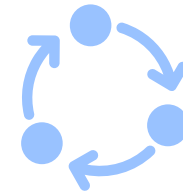
Modality

- Program delivered by
 - external provider
 - trained teacher
- Comprehensive integrated wellbeing initiatives
- Professional Learning
- Online, face to face, mixed
- Resources



Audience & Recipients

- Whole school
- Classroom groups
- Specific/select students
- Educators/staff



Type of intervention

- Belonging & engagement
- Mentoring
- Social & emotional skills
- Behavioural skills
- Exercise & body image
- Alcohol & other drugs

Evaluating wellbeing programs

Approaches to evaluating Wellbeing Programs

1. Conceptualisation of Program & design

- Program Logic
- Theory of Change
- Theoretical foundations
- Existing evidence & data

2. Determine intended outputs and outcomes

- Are we evaluating implementation? Impact?
- Who experiences outputs and outcomes?
- At what levels?

3. Consider measurement options

- Who will be involved in the evaluation?
- How will they be involved?
- Ongoing monitoring?

For each possible approach



- Consider ethical implications
- Consider practical implications
- Consider burden to participants



These considerations are heightened for children and vulnerable communities

A tool-box of methods and skills

Driven largely by evaluation purpose, data availability, budget and timeline

There is no one-size fits all

Mix-method
Triangulation
& Data linkage

Quantitative
(measuring)

Qualitative
(describing)

Experimental & Quasi-experimental
(has control group)

RCT, Low vs High,
Case-control matched,
Meta-analysis forest plots

Characteristics, Profiling,
Comparative, Differences
between groups

Case-studies, Observation

Non-experimental
(no control group)

Pre-Post intervention
surveys, Correlational,
Cross-sectional,
Existing program data

Interview, Focus groups,
Thematic & text analysis,
Photo voice, Desk reviews,
Systematic & rapid reviews

Measuring Wellbeing

Systematic review of 78 interventions on student wellbeing found 306 wellbeing outcomes:

Socio-emotional adjustment

social or emotional skills, and attitudes toward self and others, connectedness, relationships, mindfulness

Behavioural adjustment

learning engagement, resiliency, cognitive-regulation, executive function, decision making, autonomy, self-efficacy

Cognitive adjustment

prosocial behaviour, conduct problems, inattention, victimisation, aggression, suspension, risky behaviour

Internalising symptoms

reduction in mental health difficulties, anxiety, depression, dysfunctional attitudes

Engaging children and young people in evaluation

Gaining student voice is valuable but challenging

Don't undervalue the expertise and insights of educators about their students

Consider low touch options and administrative data that can limit burden on (often heavily burdened) schools and teachers



To determine if a program 'works' it is essential to ...

Understand what are the intended outputs, processes and outcomes

Consider the plausibility of these outcomes

Consider the plausibility of observing these outcomes in a crowded, complex school context

Consider the plausibility of observing these outcomes in a crowded, complex school context

- Is the program actually intended to create change to wellbeing, or is it more intended for prevention?
- Are there more proximal indicators of progress toward intended outcomes?
- Has implementation been successful? Is the implementation sustainable?
- Was the intervention accepted? Was there perception of impact?
- Is there attrition bias? Who left and why?
- What else is happening in the school? Can impact be attributed?

Limitations to finding evidence of impact

Establishing an appropriate counterfactual is not straightforward and potentially not viable

Attributing impact solely to one, when multiple programs are in use is not possible

Impact takes time but also diffuses with time

What matters, may not be able to be measured, monitored or evaluated



Ways of working

Clients desire program evaluations that are

Independent:

Working closely with the client but remaining independent

Robust:

Using reliable and valid mix-method approaches

Utilisation-focused:

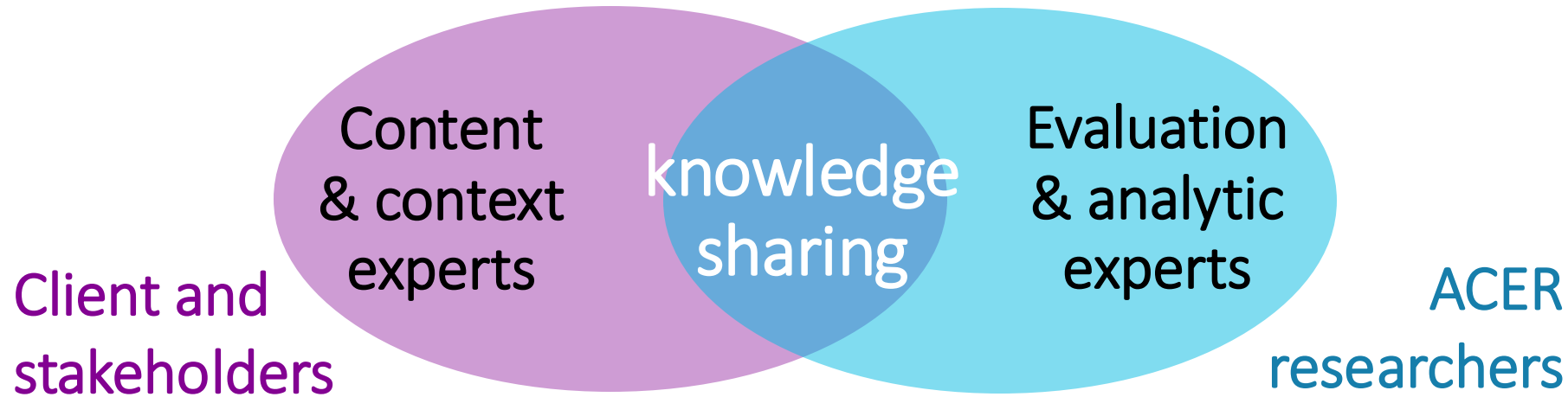
Informing decisions and improving performance

Accessible:

Explaining complex information clearly, simply and attractively

Building trust and respect is key

Stakeholder Engagement: Knowing what we don't know



Seek to learn from them, limit burden upon them,
and reciprocate benefit whenever possible

Engage appropriate stakeholders to co-design and guide evaluation
activities when working with diverse communities

What we often ask clients to consider...

- Ongoing monitoring options that streamline and standardise measurement across delivery → inform program improvement and accumulate future evaluative data
- Value and utilise existing program and feedback data → data linkage
- Access real-time reporting: Moving beyond collecting data to using data and sharing results
- The types of finding most beneficial to share with stakeholders (e.g., funding bodies, participating schools, within and across teams)



Thank you

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