

HIGHLANDS
YOUTH CO-LAB

2026
IMPACT REPORT

Strengthening the community around every young person.



FOREWORD

SARAH MANGELSDORF
PROJECT LEAD

2026 for The Highlands Youth Co-lab (HYCL) has been a year of deepening connection, shared learning and community momentum across the Southern Highlands.

What began as a small one-day event in 2024 has grown into a coordinated wellbeing ecosystem. Educators, counsellors, parents, youth workers, community organisations and the local council are now learning side by side – strengthening the protective relationships around young people and building community capacity that lasts.

None of this happens alone. We are deeply grateful to our partners and supporters who invest in preventative, community-led wellbeing. Across our three pillars – the Counsellor Co-Lab, Youth Mental Health First Aid and the Wellbeing Forum @ Our Table – we recorded 760 participations across 18 events and training sessions this year. The message from our community has been clear: **This can't be a one-off.**

"When adults feel supported, young people feel supported."

"That's how change carries across families and generations."

As we look ahead to 2027, our focus is clear: Expand the Counsellor Co-Lab and YMHFA, strengthen support for parents navigating increasing complexity, and secure multi-year investment to sustain this work. This year has shown what's possible when a community is ready to build something better for young people. And the Highlands is ready.

WHY HYCL IS NEEDED

Services are out of reach — families in the Wingecarribee have significantly fewer youth wellbeing resources compared with metropolitan and SWSLHD LGAs, making early support harder to access and harder to navigate.

Rising and complex mental health pressures for children and parents — increasing suicides, self-injurious behaviours, disordered eating, higher numbers of neurodivergent children, school disengagement, and a sharp rise in parent loneliness, psychological distress, self-doubt and cost-of-living pressures are placing unprecedented strain on young people and the adults who support them.

Disconnected local supports and no unified community approach — services operate in isolation, with no shared structure to coordinate youth wellbeing across schools, families and community organisations.

HYCL directly addresses the latest ARACY findings* - children and young people are worried about their parents' stress and mental health, and parents are worried about their children's mental health - so we need to address whole family mental health systems by:

- Opportunity for more parent–child collaborative relationships as children grow older
- Young people value connection, understanding and genuine dialogue
- Call to consider how to strengthen family wellbeing

*https://www.aracy.org.au/young-and-wise-2026-roundtables

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Gundungurra and Dharawal peoples, the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live, work and raise our families. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and recognise the enduring strength, knowledge and culture that continue to shape community.



2026 AT A GLANCE

760
People engaged

18
Events and training sessions

8
Professional development sessions

35
Adults trained in Youth MHFA

70
Participants in neurodivergent-affirming professional development

OUR COMMUNITY REACH

5%
of young people aged 11-17 in Wingecarribee

10%
of Wingecarribee families

100%
of surveyed participants said they want more opportunities like this





PILLAR 1: COUNSELLOR CO-LAB

The Counsellor Co-Lab partners with a local psychologist to deepen understanding of neurodivergent learners and strengthen connections between schools, early learning centres and community organisations.

By building stronger shared knowledge and referral pathways, this pillar is improving how our community supports neurodivergent children and their families.

Program Delivery

- **5** sessions delivered
- **10** hours of professional development
- **70** participants — educators from early learning centres and primary schools, community organisations, and local council representatives

Participants reported

- A deeper understanding of individual differences in their classrooms and programs.
- Increased confidence in supporting neurodivergent children.
- Practical strategies they could implement immediately.
- A shift in mindset from "challenging behaviour" to "communication and unmet need".
- Greater awareness of inadvertent exclusion and how to prevent it.

FEEDBACK HIGHLIGHTS

"A thoughtful presentation - I didn't know what I didn't know."

"Practical ideas I can start straight away."

"I feel more capable of understanding the differences in my classroom."

"I would love our parents to hear this!"

"Thanks so much for facilitating our session with Andrew this afternoon. He was wonderful, informative and gave us a lot to think about."

Karyn Fitzgerald
Principal, Berrima PS





PILLAR 2: YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

4

YMHFA builds a shared language and strengthens adults' capacity to support young people aged 12–18. It provides knowledge of common mental health challenges, skills to recognise early warning signs, and practical guidance on how to respond safely and confidently.

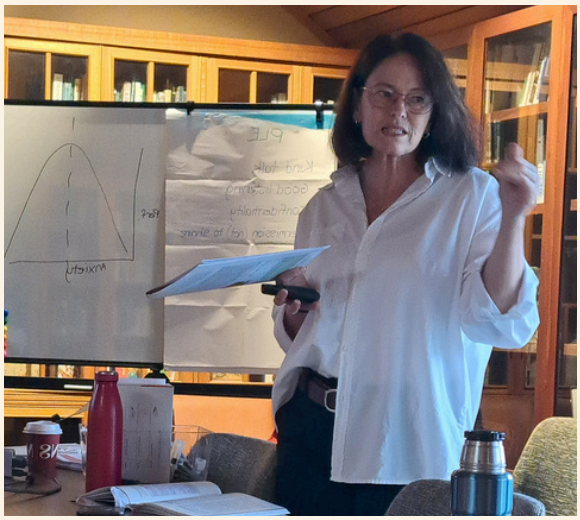
This pillar is building the confidence and capability of adults around young people and is a key part of our preventative, community-centred wellbeing system.

Program Delivery

- **2** sessions delivered
- **35** participants — educators, parents, grandparents, community organisation representatives, volunteers and coaches.

Participants reported

- Greater confidence recognising early signs of distress and knowing how to approach a young person safely.
- A clearer understanding of what to say, what not to say, and how to support without escalating a situation.
- Stronger awareness of local referral pathways and how to connect young people to the right supports early.
- A shared language and practical strategies they could use immediately in classrooms, homes and community settings.



FEEDBACK HIGHLIGHTS

"This training showed me how powerful early support can be. Prevention is the difference between a small worry and a crisis."

"I feel much more confident having those tricky conversations with young people. Finally, I know how to approach them without thinking I will make things worse."

"I wish more people in my club knew this information, it would make such a difference to how we support our kids. This is such important work."

Coach, Coverdrive Program, Bradman Foundation

PILLAR 3: WELLBEING FORUM

our table
CONVERSATION • COLLABORATION • COMMUNITY
SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS



The Wellbeing Forum @ Our Table brings internationally renowned speakers and researchers to the Highlands to share high-quality resources with early years educators, parents, carers and grandparents.

This year's theme — **Conversation, Collaboration and Community** — created a space where people could learn together regardless of school or postcode. Professor Lea Waters AM and Dr Arne Rubinstein OAM brought thoughtful, evidence-based leadership in the science of wellbeing, psychology and human connection — reminding families, teachers and community that we are the guidance and support in young people's lives, not screens, technology or AI.

This pillar centres on the relationships that shape young people's wellbeing, emphasising the importance of family, teachers and community, and the power of meaningful human connection.

Program Delivery
3 days | 11 events | 655 attendees:

- **3** professional development sessions for educators.
- **4** interactive workshops across early years, primary, secondary and parent/carer audiences involving **28** schools.
- **3** keynote presentations from internationally renowned speakers and researchers.
- **1** powerful fathers and sons evening around the fire.
- **2** recordings of parent workshops to share with other regional and rural areas across Australia.

Participants reported:

- Feeling more confident supporting young people.
- That they have gained practical strategies they could use immediately.
- Experiencing stronger connection with others in the community.
- Recognising the value of meaningful face-to-face conversations.
- Recognising the value of a shared language across families, schools and community.

FEEDBACK HIGHLIGHTS

"I could listen to Arne speak for days, such vital information. Thank you for bringing this down here"

Kristy, mother of 3 boys

"We need something like that here in the New England North West region [NSW]. As a parent of a child with mental health issues, if there is something of a similar ilk locally, I am not aware of it."
Sarah, mother of 2 girls (10 & 13yrs)

"Remind[ed] me how important it is to spend one-on-one time with my son"

"Great evening affording everyone the opportunity to contribute meaningfully"



























RESULTS AND METRICS

BUILDING CONFIDENCE, CONNECTION + MEANINGFUL CHANGE

100%
want more opportunities like this

98%
reported increased confidence in preventative measures

96%
of teachers want more opportunities for their students

95%
valued connecting with others

72%
made changes to everyday practice within one week

94%
rated the experience excellent or very good



RESULTS AND METRICS

CONNECTION + COLLABORATION

91%
valued learning across different community sectors

89%
felt more capable of having open conversations with young people

88%
told someone about the Co-Lab

82%
met someone new and identified collaborations

A growing network of people working together to strengthen youth wellbeing.



PARTNERS AND COLLABORATIONS

Highlands Youth Co-Lab extends our deep gratitude to all our partners for their ongoing commitment to this work.

We are equally thankful to the community supporters and donors who choose to remain anonymous. Your collective belief in our mission makes it possible for us to strengthen the wellbeing of young people and families across the Southern Highlands and extend this work to other regional and rural communities across Australia.

Wingecarribee Shire Council

Bowral District Children's Foundation
Caring for our children's health & well being

The Youth Impact Foundation

Burn Bright

Berida Hotel
Bowral Southern Highlands

Kieltys Irish

Williams Quality Meats

CRE8IVE

Rob Carlton

Berrima Public School
Progress to Honour
1869

#PESA

Centennial Vineyards

The Bookshop Bowral

Bradman Foundation

ALKA POWER H_2O

Bowral's Sweets & Treats

SQUAREFISH
Your story. Our hands.

Country Accent Bowral

The Fold Southern Highlands

Thyne Reid Foundation

coles

LOOKING AHEAD 2027

In response to clear gaps and growing community demand, we aim to:

01

Expand the Counsellor Co-Lab

into broader cross-sector training opportunities for educators, counsellors, youth workers, parents/carers, grandparents and community organisations.

02

Increase support for adults

with YMHFA training and practical wellbeing sessions across the Highlands, offering more parent–child workshops that strengthen connection, communication and protective relationships.

03

Deepen school partnerships

with tailored wellbeing initiatives and shared language frameworks building on this year's events.

04

Embed Highlands Youth Co-Lab

as a long-term, community-led wellbeing model across the Highlands and collaborate with other regional and rural localities across Australia.



Join us!

Join this community

Be part of what's next

www.youthcolab.org.au

OUR THREE-YEAR VISION

2027-2029

Over the next three years, we aim to:

01

Build community capability

- Extend Youth Mental Health First Aid to all high schools, with a pathway to Teen MHFA, positioning the Southern Highlands as one of the highest-trained regions in Australia.
- Grow the Counsellor Co-Lab into a whole-of-school model, with complementary parent, carer and grandparent workshops that build shared language across school communities.
- Increase support for early years educators and families, embedding shared language from the start of a child's life.

02

Strengthen early intervention

- Prototype an in-school allied health role to triage emerging needs, support families navigating confusing specialist referrals and strengthen early intervention.
- Expand parent-child connection workshops, including mother-son, father-daughter and mixed parent/child formats.
- Train local youth workers and facilitators in Rite of Passage, enabling community-run programs with local businesses and trainers.

03

Create long-term sustainability

- Establish a local project lead for three years to ensure coordination, continuity and community ownership - with the long-term aim for schools and organisations to sustain the model independently.
- Position HYCL as the region's recognised source of wellbeing knowledge and preventative support.
- Offer the HYCL model to other regional and rural areas, sharing a scalable approach to community-led change.

INVESTMENT REQUIRED

$350,000 / year

To deliver the proposed three-year community-led change prototype.