

# Stronger Brains Submission to Productivity Commission Mental Health Inquiry

We believe a significant deficit in current mental health programs and support, is they don't address the neurological processes underlying cognitive and social-emotional functioning. We welcome this inquiry considering how reforms outside of healthcare can improve mental health. It's critical to integrate the science of brain plasticity across all parties involved in facilitating improved mental health, so as to realise social and economic benefits over the long term.

At Stronger Brains we specialise in assessing and improving brain health including cognitive function and social and emotional well-being. We scientifically measure processing speed, focus and attention, working memory and social cognition and use tools to strengthen these areas.

Please find additional detail below on our organisation, the science behind our program, how our program works and where it has been successful.

Our response to several draft recommendations, posed by this inquiry, follow:

## **Section 17 : Interventions in early childhood and school education:**

- **17.2 Social and Emotional Development in Preschool Children**
  - Early childhood health checks expanded to assess children's social and emotional development - should also include online brain health assessment indicators to measure neurological processes underlying cognitive and social-emotional functioning so mental health issues can be identified early.
  - Pre service training programs for early childhood educators and teachers - should include a component on brain plasticity and its translation for restoring or improving brain health.
- **17.3 Social and Emotional Learning Programs in the Education System**
  - Guidelines for the accreditation of initial teacher education and professional development courses for teachers, which will include social and emotional learning - should also include a component on brain plasticity and its translation for restoring or improving brain health.
  - Guidelines for the accreditation of external social and emotional learning programs offered to schools, developed by an expert advisory panel - this panel should include expertise on brain plasticity and its translation for restoring or improving brain health.
- **17.4 Educational Support for Children with Mental Illness**
  - The upcoming Disability Standards for Education review in 2020, include specific consideration of the way the standards affect students with mental

illness and their education outcomes - brain plasticity and its translation for restoring or improving brain health should inform how these standards consider children and young people that have disengaged from schooling.

- **17.5 Wellbeing Leaders in Schools**
  - We are very supportive of the employment of a dedicated wellbeing leader within a school, however it's imperative that this leader is educated in brain plasticity and its translation for restoring or improving brain health.
- **17.6 Data on Child Social and Emotional Wellbeing**
  - An indicator of child social and emotional wellbeing needs to incorporate assessment indicators to measure neurological processes underlying cognitive and social-emotional functioning.

#### **Section 18 : Youth economic participation:**

- **18.1 Training for Educators in Tertiary Education Institutions**
  - All teaching staff to undertake training on student mental health and wellbeing - should also include a component on brain plasticity and its translation for restoring or improving brain health.
- **18.2 Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy in Tertiary Education Institutions**
  - All tertiary education institutions to have a student mental health and wellbeing strategy - should include a strategy for how the science of brain plasticity in facilitating improved mental health, is integrated across on-site services.

Thankyou for the opportunity to participate in this important review, and we welcome the opportunity for further dialogue.

Yours sincerely,

Wendy Haigh

Co-Founder

Stronger Brains

## **Our Organisation**

We are a not-for-profit organisation that improves children's brain health, to elevate academic achievement and personal wellness throughout life.

We provide schools with an affordable assessment of students' brain health, and deliver personalized programs that transform their cognitive and social-emotional functioning.

From learning to read, to building meaningful relationships, to setting and achieving long-term goals, brain health is vital to success in school and life. When brain health suffers, the observable symptoms are commonly labeled as a learning disability, or a type of mental illness. For the 1 in 5 children who suffer from brain-based deficits, the path to identifying the specific problem(s), and getting effective treatment, can be long and costly. Our program is built to address this problem, and to provide all children and young people with a path to a healthier brain.

We provide an affordable means to assess and document children and young peoples' brain health across relevant cognitive and social-emotional domains. For any child or young person in need of a healthier brain, we provide a treatment strategy aimed at restoring and improving these processes, for increased academic performance and personal wellness.

Stronger Brains was founded in 2016 by Wendy Haigh and Dr. Michael Merzenich. Wendy Haigh is a Finance and business professional with international experience in Science, Health, Education and Social Services. Professor emeritus at UCSF, Dr. Michael Merzenich is a world leading expert on brain plasticity who spent decades researching the brain's ability to change, and developing scientifically proven methods to improve people's brains.

## **The Science Behind Our Program**

Our approach is rooted fundamentally in the science of brain plasticity, which is the brain's ability to adapt in response to experience. The science underlying our program was developed by an international team of neuroscientists and represents a culmination of 30 years of research in neurological science and related medicine.

Our tools have been rigorously tested and scientifically proven to be beneficial in more than 100 independent, peer-reviewed research papers published in scientific journals. Our tools have been shown to bring significant improvements in several categories including processing speed, memory, attention, everyday cognition, vision and hearing, and mood and control.

## **How our program works**

Our team delivers a scalable (train-the-trainer) model that assesses every individual's brain health to better understand their capacity to learn and to identify areas that need strengthening. Using the results of the assessment, individually tailored training programs that include game-like exercises designed to improve specific brain and cognitive function,

combined with brain education and empowerment (for example physical exercise, mindfulness, music/art/animal therapies and brain food) are delivered. Progress can be reviewed and results measured so the program can be adapted to the needs of the individual.

### **Where our program has been successful**

Stronger Brains are currently in over 30 schools globally, working with over 11,000 students. We have also partnered with the Department of Social Services as part of the Try, Test and Learn Fund to assist some of the most vulnerable in society onto a path towards stable, sustainable independence.