

## Youth Mental Health Surf and Ocean Therapy Pilot Program Evaluation Report October - November 2022



### Flowstate Margaret River Inc. Mission Statement

Our mission is to develop and facilitate evidence based and innovative mental health therapy for young people and adults via the medium of surfing, the ocean and being in nature.

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## Background to this project

Flowstate Margaret River Inc. (Flowstate) is a NFP group therapy organisation founded in 2021. Our programs are designed to reduce barriers for people accessing mental health services, whilst increasing outcomes related to employment, education, social connectedness, and community engagement. Our programs provide early intervention mental health and wellbeing support outside of a traditional mental health clinic setting.

Our programs are informed by the early intervention model, Brief Youth Intervention Toolkit by Orygen (The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health), Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT), Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and sensory and mindfulness therapies. We have also drawn from the research conducted and collated by the International Surf Therapy Organisation (ISTO). The research performed by ISTO has demonstrated the effectiveness of utilising Surf Therapy to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression and increase self-esteem, resilience, personal empowerment, and social skills (<https://intlsurftherapy.org/resources/>). "Surf therapy is a method of intervention that combines surf instruction/surfing and structured individual and/or group activities to promote psychological, physical and psychosocial well-being" (Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice). Surf therapy is an exciting area of therapeutic intervention that has a growing body of evidence for its effectiveness with mental health difficulties.

Our programs combine the practice of learning to surf or increasing surf skills with psychological group therapy. The group therapy discussions promote social and emotional skill development in an inclusive and supportive environment. Each week a different mental health topic is discussed for the first half of the session and the second half of the session provide an opportunity to practice different coping strategies in the ocean along with learning to surf and or increase surf skills. Our programs are more than just about learning to surf they are about developing a relationship with the ocean, in order to use it as a resource to support mental and emotional wellbeing.

Our programs have been designed by accredited mental health therapists who have a combined 20 years of experience in the design and facilitation of mental health group therapy in both inpatient and community settings, both in Australia and in the UK. Our programs are research based, outcome

measured, trauma informed, and participant led. Our programs provide a space for values to be expressed and opportunities to explore pathways to live in line with these values. Ultimately, our hope is that these programs will support people's ability to engage in a life that is uniquely meaningful to them and allow them to better cope with the challenges of our ever-evolving world.

Our programs are run in partnership with the Margaret River Surf School. Our two youth programs are; a 4-week mental wellness program aimed at young people (YP) who want to increase their mental wellbeing and social connection through group surf therapy and a 6-week mental health program aimed at YP with mild to moderate mental health experiences and or a mental health diagnosis.

Our pilot program was our 6-week Youth Mental Health Surf and Ocean Therapy program and was funded by the Western Australian Government with a Covid-19 Youth Recovery Grant. This grant funded two of these programs. The pilot was delivered over October and November of 2022 and the second program is planned for April 2023. We have also received funding from the Augusta Margaret River Shire which will allow us to provide three youth wellness programs throughout 2023.

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## Project aims

Aims of the pilot project were for YP to;

- develop knowledge, confidence, and mental health literacy.
- learn practical mental health skills to increase resilience, coping and emotion regulation in order to enable functional capacity and community engagement.
- have increased accessibility to mental health support by providing an innovative and creative mental health group therapy experience utilising the medium of surfing.



## Participants

The program had a maximum of twelve spots available. The program was aimed at YP aged 12 – 17 years. Twelve YP were invited to the program, of that nine participated in the program (three YP withdrew prior to the start of the program). The YP were aged between 12 and 14 years. There were eight girls and two boys. No YP identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. One YP identified as being gender diverse. The YP resided in the Margaret River and the Busselton area. Six YP were referred from the psychologist at the Busselton Senior High School. Three were referred by a youth worker from Margaret River and one was self-referred by their parent. All YP were experiencing mental health experiences, and some had a mental health diagnosis including (anxiety and ADHD).



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## Interventions

This program was modelled on the Brief Youth Intervention Toolkit by Orygen (the National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health). Our program was 6 weeks in length. Sessions took place on a Wednesday morning at Redgate Beach, near Margaret River, from 9am to 11:45pm.

Surfboards, wetsuits, and rash vests were provided by the Margaret River Surf School and sessions were facilitated by Rob West, Fynn Mueller and Brooke Paterson. Rob and Brooke are accredited mental health therapists and occupational therapists and Fynn is a qualified teacher. All facilitators are qualified surf instructors.

The YP required their own transport to and from the car park. Five YP were provided transport by their school teacher and student support officer. These staff members participated in all the sessions as it was a requirement from the school. The other YP were provided transport by their parents.

The YP met in the beach car park, changed into their wetsuits and rash vests, and were provided a surfboard. The group walked together along a path through sand dunes for approximately 300m to the beach. Each week a different mental health topic was discussed for the first half of the session and the second half of the session was based in the ocean where different coping strategies were practiced whilst learning to surf, increase surf skills or engage in the ocean as the YP desired (swimming, hand planning, body surfing/boarding). The group therapy component was facilitated in a private location towards the sand dunes near the riverbed. Each session commenced with an acknowledgement of country, followed by group discussion and activities about the mental health topic for the week. The group then moved to the oceans edge where surf safety and surf knowledge were discussed, before heading into the water for ocean engagement including surfing, bodysurfing, hand planning and swimming.

The topics of each week included the following;

1. Mental health continuum
2. Values and committed actions
3. Stress and the inner critic
4. Understanding emotions and communicating effectively
5. Behaviour change
6. Tips for a healthy headspace and goal setting.

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## Evaluation Measures

In order to deliver programs that were client centred and meaningful we felt it valuable to measure whether the program had a positive outcome on mental health and wellbeing.

We utilised the Kesler 10 Psychological Distress Scale (K10). This scale measures psychological distress and is a useful tool to measure outcomes following intervention for common mental health experiences. We utilised the K10 to explore changes in the psychological distress of the YP before and after the 6-week surf therapy program.

We also utilised the World Health Organisation (five) Wellbeing Index (WHO 5) that measures current mental wellbeing over the past 2 weeks. We utilised the WHO 5 to explore any changes in the wellbeing of YP before and after the program.

We also carried out a post program survey that was provided to the YP, parents, and teachers. This survey explored levels of satisfaction, safety, and feedback.



## Results and Findings

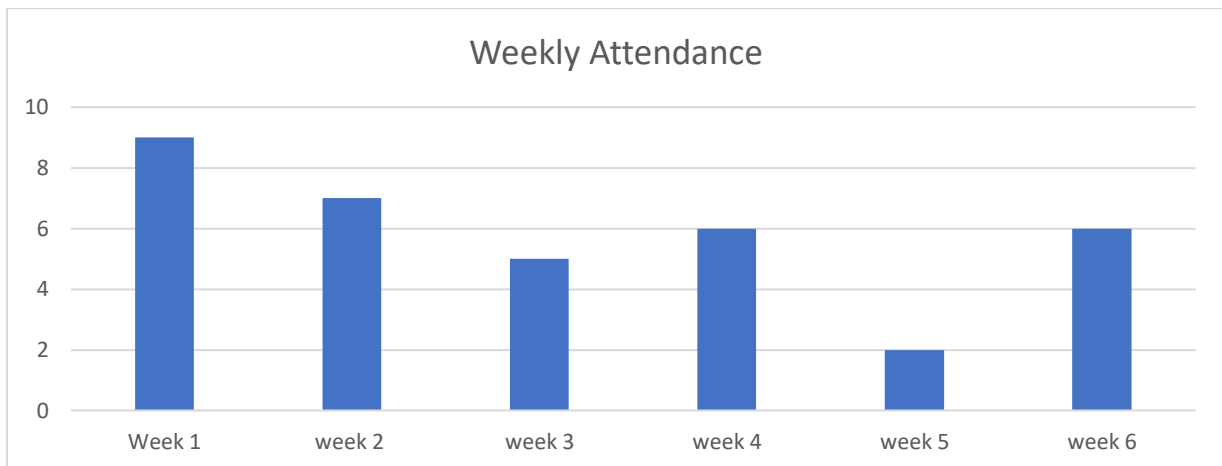
### 1. Attendance

Twelve YP were invited to engage in the program. Two YP withdrew a week before the program started due to low motivation/other commitments. One withdrew the day before due to a netball injury. They are not included in the below demographic charts.

Two YP withdrew after week 2. One of these participants broke their ankle outside of the group and the other left the group due to an unplanned move to live with a family member in a location out of the southwest region of WA.

The below diagram shows overall YP attendance. Please note that only two YP attended in week 5. The other YP were unable to attend as the teacher's providing transportation to the YP were sick. As a result, only Margaret River based YP could attend this week.

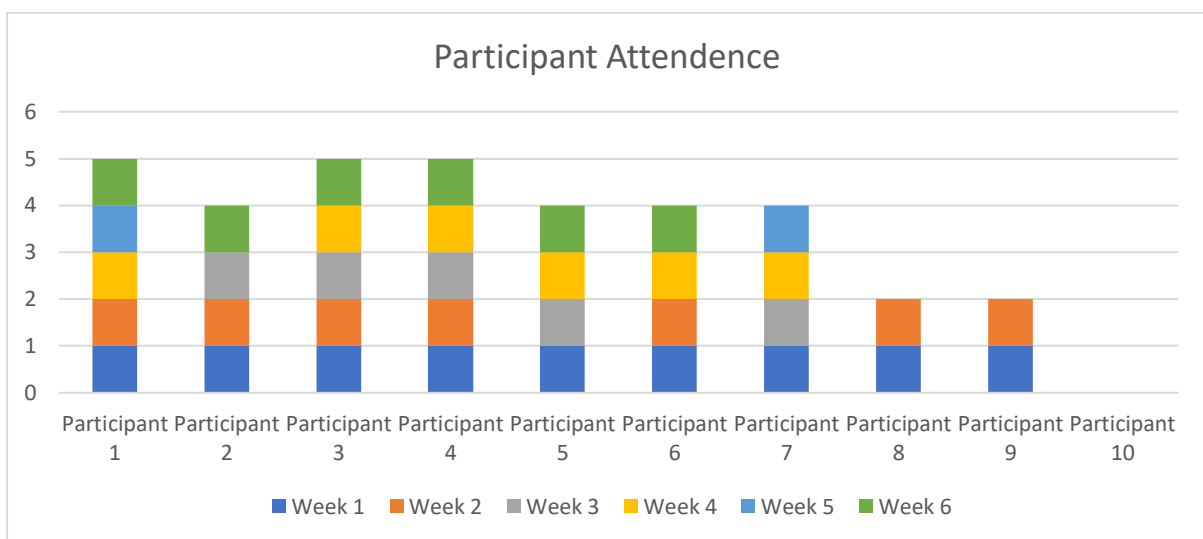
**Table 1. Weekly Attendance**





The below graph shows how many sessions each YP attended. Three YP withdrew from the program early, as per reasons stated above. Of the seven students who engaged throughout the program, they attended either 4 or 5 sessions out of the 6 available. Reasons given for their absence were related to physical illness.

**Table 2. Participant Attendance**

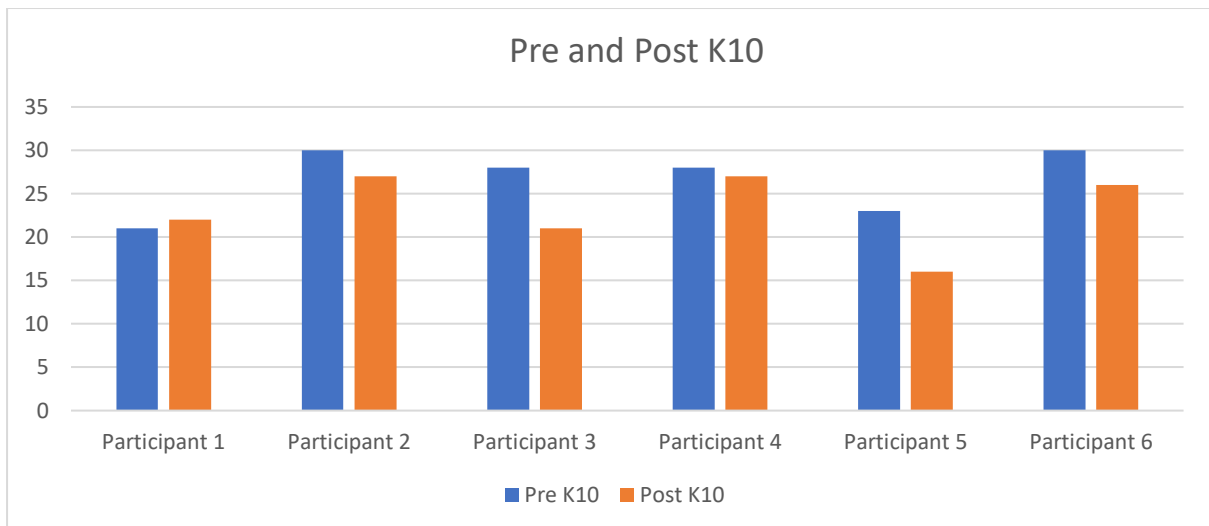


## Quantitative Data

### 1. Kesler 10 Psychological Distress Scale (K10).

The K10 was completed by YP a week prior to the start of the program and then completed again following the final session. Of the seven YP who completed the program six filled in the post session K10. The below graph demonstrates a trend of a reduction in K10 scores in all but one YP.

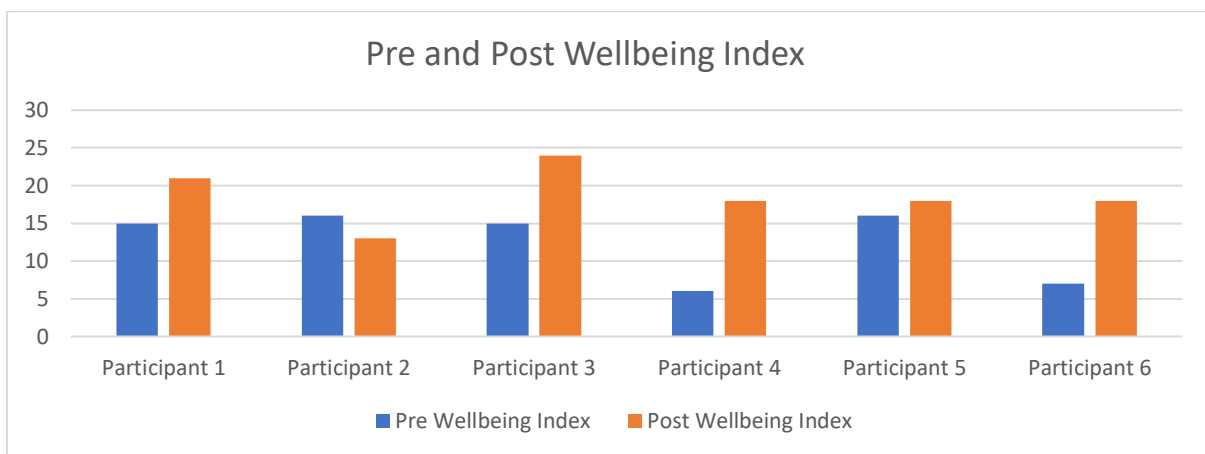
**Table 3. Pre and Post K10**



## 2. World Health Organisation (five) Wellbeing Index (WHO 5)

The WHO 5 was completed by YP at the beginning of session one and then following session 6. Of the seven YP who completed the program, six filled in the post session WHO 5. See the below graph which demonstrates a trend of an increase in wellbeing index scores in all but one YP.

**Table 4. WHO 5**



**Please note:** the YP who scored a slightly higher K10 was different to the YP that scored a slightly lower WHO 5. This demonstrates that all YP who completed the pre and post evaluation showed an improvement in at least one of the measures.



## Qualitative Data

The feedback received from YP, parents, referrers, and teachers following this program was positive and very encouraging.

Clinical observations of YP carried out by the facilitators were as follows:

- Relationships were developed and strengthened between YP, the teachers and the facilitators.
- Participation and self-disclosure within the group increased towards the latter half of the program demonstrating a level of trust had been developed within the group.
- YP regularly expressed enjoyment at being involved in the program, particularly during the ocean and surfing based activities.

### 1. Young People

Six out of the seven YP who completed the program also completed the post group survey. Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain the 7<sup>th</sup> post survey from the YP's parent. All YP were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the program by answering yes or no to questions. They were also asked to rate safety, satisfaction with surfing, likelihood to recommend the program to a friend and usefulness of the mental health strategies delivered.

**Table 5. Number of clients registering positive change**

Satisfaction measure	Yes	No	Satisfaction rating %
I feel better	6	0	100%
I feel more happy	6	0	100%
I feel fitter than before	6	0	100%
I had fun	6	0	100%
I made new friendships or strengthened existing ones	6	0	100%

**Table 6. Safety**

Satisfaction rating	Very	Fairly	Not safe
How safe did I feel when participating in the Flowstate program	5	1	0

**Table 7. Ocean satisfaction rating**

Satisfaction rating (scale of 10)	10	Satisfaction rating %
How good was being in the ocean and surfing?	6	100%

**Table 8. Likelihood to recommend the program**

Satisfaction rating (scale of 5)	Very Likely	Likely
How likely would you be to recommend this program to friend	3	3

**Table 9. Mental health strategies**

Satisfaction measure (out of 10 strategies)	Yes	No	Satisfaction rating %
Do you plan to use one or more of the mental health strategies taught to you during this program	6	0	100%

The YP were also asked the following questions, please see their responses.

**What was your favourite thing about the program?**

- “Being able to have fun without being judged”
- “I can make new friends and help my mental health”
- “Surfing”
- “The surfing”

**Please write down some words or phrases that come to mind when you think about surfing and being in the ocean?**

- “Calm, beautiful, animals, friends”
- “Calm, safe, beautiful”
- “Seaweed, water, salt, chilling out, fun”

**Other feedback and comments?**

- “I had so much fun thanks”
- “Nope, I think this was very fun”

## 2. Staff feedback

Feedback provided by the two Busselton High School staff members identified high levels of satisfaction when asked about the following: the program overall, the delivery and safety of the program, the impact on YP, the benefits of the mental health coping skills taught and the facilitation of the group. Both staff strongly agreed they would recommend this program to other students.

- *“Students appeared happier, were interacting with others more positively. Students expressed to me that they were feeling better after the program. I overheard students giving MH (Mental Health) advice to friends using strategies they learnt in the program e.g. mindfulness, towards moves etc”*
- *“Students were happier after sessions and have been talking about how great the program is to their peers. They have also been sharing the strategies discussed during the group therapy with their peers.”*

The Busselton high school wrote an article on the program which was included in their end of year newsletter. Please see Appendix 1.

## Parent feedback

Feedback provided by the YP’s parents;

- *“Xx is so much more brave in the ocean, I can’t believe how much she just wanted to do at the beach. Thank you so much, xx thoroughly enjoyed your program”.*
- *“Not only did xx thoroughly enjoy this program and quite clearly benefit from it, but it was well organised and feedback about his progress was provided. Rob explained beautifully in his feedback the strategies he used to help xx with his anxiety, how tools he used in the water to deal with the waves could also be used on land as well. He had positive discussions with xx in a relaxed environment about the benefits & difficulties of living with ADHD, & shared about other successful people who are also ADHD making xx feel better about himself.*

- *“Xx expressed feeling accepted and cared about. He said that Rob was really nice to him, was interested in him & what he had to say. He said he felt like he could trust him & felt like he could talk to him, unlike his previous experiences of being in a therapeutic environment. He loved being outside and being able to move around at the same time as talking about his mental health. This is really important because he's ADHD & struggles to sit still. It gave xx something to look forward to as he has learning difficulties and struggles with his schoolwork and feels as though teachers never allow him to explain himself to them or the opportunity to tell his side of the story. They often just dismiss his ADHD as bad behaviour. xx said the other kids enjoyed it too & got to talk about their mental health, probably more than he did, but he got to help out which he was stoked about & definitely helped his self-esteem. Because he struggles at school he has really suffered with low self esteem & it has effected & his sense of self worth. This program has definitely made him feel more confident and better about himself.”*
- *“My daughter is not very outdoorsy but she had an amazing time in this program and always came home happy afterwards and wanting to share her day with me. Very positive experience for her. Thankyou.”*
- *“I think this program is great to help support students who are going through tough times”.*



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## Conclusion and Discussion

### 1. Main Findings

The results from the pre and post measures and the answers from the evaluation along with feedback from staff and parents are very encouraging. They give a strong indication that Flowstate Margaret River Inc. youth surf therapy program have had a positive effect on the mental health and wellbeing of the YP involved.

Seven of the nine YP completed the program. Two participants withdrew after week 2. One of these participants broke their ankle outside of the group and the other left the group due to an unplanned move to live with a family member in a location out of the southwest region of WA.

The K10 results demonstrates a reduction in psychosocial distress of all but one participant. The WHO (five) demonstrates an increase in wellbeing in all but one participant. The participant who scored a slightly higher K10 was different to the participant that scored a slightly WHO 5 score. This demonstrates that all participants who completed the pre and post evaluation showed an improvement in at least one of the measures which indicates that the program had an overall positive impact on the wellbeing of the group.

The feedback received from staff and parents further supports the benefits of the program. Staff feedback stated high levels of satisfaction with the program and reported students were happier, engaging more positively with others and shared mental health strategies learnt in the program with their peers. Parents noted increased confidence and self-esteem, engagement in nature and physical activity and increased literacy surrounding mental health.

YP's narrative feedback also reflects the qualitative measures. All YP ticked they felt happier because of the program, all stated they had fun and either made new friends or strengthened existing ones, all stated they would continue to utilise at least one mental health coping strategy learnt during the program, all participants felt fairly or very safe during the program and all reported they would be likely to or very likely to recommend the program to a friend. Some of the words YP used to describe the program included calm, fun, beautiful, friends, and safe.



## 2. Challenges

- **Referral generation:** Our ability to generate referrals was impacted due to our organisation being newly established and surf therapy being a new concept. We feel this issue will decrease with the more programs we run and the more community connections we make which we are continuing to do. We have programs running throughout 2023 and we are forming partnerships with local organisations and schools.
- **Transport:** For YP attending from Busselton transport was initially a barrier. This was overcome by teachers providing transport in cars. In the future this may be overcome by Flowstate having its own minivan and providing transport or by providing the program closer to the town location.
- **Time and day of the program:** We ran our program on a Wednesday morning, this proved difficult for YP to attend who were school students. We have since run programs on a Saturday morning. We hope to run programs in partnership with the local school during school hours.

## 3. Next Steps

From the Covid-19 Youth Recovery Grant we have one more program that is funded running in April of 2023. We also have 2 shire funded programs that will also be run during 2023. After this there is no funding for further programs.

Flowstate aims to provide ongoing surf therapy programs to YP in the southwest who face mental health challenges. The next steps would be to try and obtain funding via sustainable sources so that we can continue to provide further support to the YP of our local community. We see this being achieved by forming partnerships with the local schools, community organisations, and health providers. We also aim to provide adult (over 25years) and NDIS funded programs. We intend to become a charity within in the next year which would increase our organisations funding sources.

## Appendix

# Flowstate Mental Health Surf Therapy Program

Over the past term, we were fortunate enough to collaborate with Flowstate Margaret River to conduct a mental health and saltwater therapy program to a small group of students. The course took place over six weeks at Redgate Beach in Margaret River and saw the participants learning about their mental health before hitting the ocean for a bit of saltwater therapy. Surf therapy is a method of intervention that combines surf instruction/surfing and structured individual and/or group activities to promote psychological, physical and psychosocial well-being.

As a research based program the aim was to use common best practice to give students a mental health toolkit. Sessions included topics such as “the stress bucket”, “the inner critic”, “choice point” , “anxiety responses” and “tips for a healthy headspace”. Students participated in group therapy each session to discuss these topics and then hit the waves.

Each week students were faced with varying and challenging conditions ranging from glassy off shore face waves all the way through to howling onshore large dumping monsters. Each participant demonstrated strength and resilience each week as they adapted to the conditions and gave their all. Overall enjoyment and student outcomes were extremely positive and we would like to extend a very large thanks and snaps to Rob, Brooke and Fynn for facilitating such a wonderful program for our students.