



NSW SECONDARY PRINCIPALS' COUNCIL



POSITION PAPER

Author: John Frew

Date: March 2009

School Counselling Services

Background

The SPC recognises that the role of the District School Counsellor (DSC) is complex and deals with a variety of issues from those affecting people at the individual level to those affecting schools and their communities. The role of the DSC is to support the Principal by providing specialist advice and services to address the emotional, behavioural and learning needs of students and to maintain a workplace which is safe, supportive and constructive. The DSC is able to provide professional assistance in researching issues relating to mental health, wellbeing and the learning environment.

Expert counselling services are an integral feature of all secondary schools. With the change in allocation of DSCs being determined in accordance with any formula, that formula needs to be on the table and negotiated with the SPC well in advance of any decisions being made. The three year period for reassessment of DSC allocations will end in 2009 when new allocations of this resource are due.

At present, DSC allocation is across both secondary and primary settings and a secondary school may well have three different people fulfilling the role during the week. This gives the DSC career opportunities across settings in having contact with the range of counselling services, including testing and identification of students with disabilities, learning and language deficits and with transition of students from primary to secondary settings. However, this means that secondary schools are frequently left with a fragmented service delivery. This is heavily dependent on the communication strategies, personalities and time constraints of the DSCs in their planning and receipt of handovers of ongoing cases and issues at the end of (sometimes) every day.

The SPC believes there is a strong case for DSCs to be allocated on a full time basis to large secondary schools, in much the same way that a Careers Adviser or Librarian is allocated. There is much data to support the importance of the relationship in a counselling setting. Adolescents are more likely to relate to someone who is present when they have regular counselling appointments and when there is an emergent and urgent need. There is data also to support the need for additional counselling support for adolescents as they encounter some serious challenges at this crucial stage of development and as mental health issues often arise significantly for the first time during adolescence.

The SPC is of the view that the continuation of recruitment to the DSC should continue in order to meet the needs of students, particularly as from 2010 the school leaving age will be raised to Year 10 and 17 years of age in NSW. Schools are finding increasing difficulty in replacing DSCs on leave and in many cases have placed willing welfare teachers into the roles during vacancies. At present, many DSCs are able to practice privately due to the availability of the Medicare levy and so they are not as available to schools to fill vacancies as they previously were.

Welfare teachers cannot fill the roles of the DSC who is responsible for:

- Disability identification, testing and confirmation
- Support to schools for all applications for Itinerant Services
- Contributions to LST teams from a qualified psychologist
- Provision of test and other data for Funding Support applications
- Provision of qualified psychological counselling to students
- Provision of qualified psychological counselling and risk management services to schools and communities during and following critical incidents
- Interagency support coordination for student
- Providing professional learning to staff regarding mental health issues.

In attracting and retaining qualified and suitable DSCs, their career structure needs to be addressed, as does their professional status in schools and their work and supervision models. In order to make this position attractive to suitable personnel, a promotion structure within a strong supervision model, including the Principal as well as the District Guidance Officer would be of possible benefit.

Recommendations

1. That DET continue to recruit and train DSCs and provide them to all schools.
2. That a review of DSC allocations be undertaken to examine the needs of secondary schools with a view to providing a minimum of 1.0 DSC allocation to all secondary schools and central schools large enough to have a Deputy Principal position.
3. That a review of the career structure, placement, supervision and promotion of DSCs be undertaken.
4. That all decisions regarding the allocation of counselling services to secondary schools includes timely and responsive consultation with the SPC.