

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

4 August 2011

Dear Sir or Madam

Re: Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

My letter relates to the enquiry by Senator Fierravanti-Wells and Senator Siewert. I would like raise some issues in regard to the Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services.

### **Background Information**

- I am trained teacher and a fully registered psychologist, who holds a Master of Educational Psychology degree from the University of Queensland. I have worked extensively with children and adolescents, with and without disabilities, and many of these children also have mental health problems. I have also worked in forensic settings with young people and adults.
- The children and adolescents I have worked with come from diverse populations and socio-economic groups. I have worked with: young refugees, incarcerated young people, abused children, children with disabilities, children with learning disorders, adolescents with addictions, children with mental health issues.
- I have worked extensively with students who have been excluded from schools. Some of these students have used drugs and/or alcohol, they have been aggressive toward teachers and students. Some of these young people have extensive learning difficulties and are usually several years behind in their school work. School Psychologists need to be engaged to work with these students during their exclusion period, especially before they are placed in a new school. If the issues are not addressed these students frequently repeat their negative behaviours and may end up in juvenile detention, where they learn more anti-social behaviours. Prevention of young people's negative behaviours costs the community less (socially and emotionally) than housing a young person in a detention centre or in an adult goal.
- During my twenty plus years of working with children and adolescents, the importance of providing professional Career Development/Career Guidance to adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome cannot be overstated. These students need to be supported with their career/job selections and provided with ongoing support as they leave school to commence further studies or employment. If these students are not provided with adequate support from teachers and School Psychologists with post graduate training and qualifications in Career Development, the students may remain unemployed for long periods of time and become less willing to participate in work placement programs.

- I have worked with Indigenous children and family members, so that all parties are working on achieving improved learning outcomes for the children and their family members. I am contacted by some members of an Aboriginal community to interpret the school's administrators' behaviour toward their children. For example, some children are sent home when they refuse to undertake work set by the teacher because the children and students consider the work boring, unchallenging and unrelated to their culture.

## **Key Points – School Psychology**

- My master's degree in Education and Developmental Psychology has given me a good grounding in lifespan psychology. I am trained in a range of psychological assessments, and am able to make diagnostic decisions regarding a child's mental health. I can provide anxiety reduction programs to anxious children within a school setting, where children feel safe and who are more willing to voice their fears than in a foreign environment.
- I have been very fortunate to work with the teams from the Child, Youth, Mental Health Service (CYMHS), who have provided additional support to some schools by providing a fully registered psychologist on the school site, half a day to one day a week. This additional support means that children do not need to leave the school. The parents do not need to take extra time off work, particularly when they are trying to make ends meet in lowly paid casual employment.
- Children and their parents are usually willing to speak to School Psychologists as they are seen as an important part of the extended school community. Therefore, all parties are likely to communicate around issues relating to the welfare of the child and his/her family. Many issues arise from children having learning disabilities, being abused and from their mood disorders.
- Many young people with mental health problems are first detected as having a problem in the school environment. The School Psychologist, Guidance Counsellor or Counsellor is generally the first person that teachers notify if they see a marked change in the behaviour of the students. The teachers are willing to talk to their School Psychologist regarding a range of issues. They feel safe enough to talk about these issues without feeling foolish for raising their concerns about a child's mood disorder. The School Psychologist liaises with the child's parents and the GP to provide a well-rounded profile of the child in and out of school.
- Some School Psychologists provide free parenting programs to parents to assist the parents to manage their child's behavioural issues better at home.
- School Psychologists with post graduate qualifications in Career Development are needed in schools so that they can support all students, with and without disabilities, to achieve their goals of working and/or studying at a university.
- At some schools there is only one School Psychologist/School Counsellor to 1000 or more children. The ratio needs to be closer to one to five hundred children, so that children at risk of suicide are not overlooked in the school community. I understand that the NSW Coroner has made the 1: 500 ratio in order to prevent another student taking their life due to the excessive workloads that School Psychologists/School Counsellors often find themselves in and who were unable to meet the high demands of adolescent students with mental health problems.

## **Recommendations**

- That the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs consider the need for highly trained School Psychologists to be available to children from age two to age 18. The children, with and

without disabilities, need specialist assistance within their school environs, particularly when their mental health problems dominate their lives to such an extent that they consider self-harming and/or completing suicide.

- School Psychologists need to be available within school settings, so that parents, teachers, volunteers and children know who can talk to, particularly when issues arise at school or at home.
- School Psychologists with post graduate qualifications in Career Development are needed in schools, so that they can support all students, with and without disabilities, to achieve their goals of working and/or studying at a university.

Yours faithfully,