

## **A SUBMISSION BY Australian Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools Association (APACS)**

### **About APACS**

The Australian Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools Association (APACS) is the peak national professional association for school psychologists, school counsellors and guidance officers in Australia. We provide leadership and support to our members who work in school psychology and educational guidance and counselling in Australian schools.

### **Introduction**

Thank you for the invitation to provide our associations views to the Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. We recognise that a number of strategic reviews into the mental health system have been completed and that this enquiry is focussing on other matters not addressed by these recent reviews.

APACS responded to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health, however, despite making both written and in person submissions, we do not seem to have been recognised in the final report in the Prevention and Early Intervention Early Childhood and Schooling Chapter.

Therefore, as well as responding to the first four points of other matters not addressed by the recent reviews, we would like to alert you to the school psychology and counselling profession that is already in existence in various forms across all schools in Australia. These professionals have specialised training and experience in mental health and suicide prevention working with children and adolescents in school environments.

#### **1. Emerging evidence- based approaches....**

School psychologists and counsellors are highly skilled professionals trained to work in the early developmental period, before a child enters school through to the end of the school years, adolescence and young adulthood. Within this demographic, schools have a critical role to play in mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention. As all students go to school, schools are the logical venue for suicide prevention activities.

School psychologists and counsellors should be resourced and empowered to assume a leadership role in mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention by developing policies, procedures and whole of school resilience programs that are embedded into the curriculum thereby enabling all students access in a supportive manner. Schools core business is teaching and learning and as such, literacy and numeracy outcomes are often used to rate an effective school. The introduction of a set of National Wellbeing outcomes, supported in its implementation and measurement by the school psychologist or counsellor would place mental health promotion, prevention and early Intervention firmly on the agenda.

School psychologists and counsellors are best placed to identify those students who need additional support, to refer where appropriate as they know the students, and become the connector between the external support agencies and the school. A

working knowledge and understanding of school and community and culture is critical in planning intervention activities for at risk groups such as LGBTQI, CALD, students with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, the impact of negative life experiences (e.g. bullying, loss and grief) and those students effected by abuse and complex trauma.

School psychologists and counsellors have the educational knowledge and expertise to work with schools and adjust the programs for students at risk to ensure the student remains engaged in an educational program and connected to peers and supportive teachers. Positive and caring school environments enhance engagement and connectedness, encourage adolescents to discuss concerns with known supportive professionals and provide a protective function that mitigates suicide risk.

School psychologists and counsellors are trained in evidence-based approaches and are ideally placed to assist school administrators to choose appropriate programs for their school culture and community.

Because school psychologists and counsellors work full time in a particular school, they already have relationships with students, school staff and the parent community. They are expertly placed to disseminate information to staff and the community on signs of suicide, risk factors, warning signs and where to go for help if they are concerned.

Adolescents are renowned for keeping things private and not seeking help. Training school staff and the community by school psychologists and counsellors to recognise risk factors and warning signs will promote mental health intervention. Adding unknown professionals to the school site or requiring students to access an offsite intervention hub with people they have no relationship with, is fraught with danger. School psychologists and counsellors are in the sight of students all day. They have relationship and trust and are therefore best placed, if resourced appropriately, to deliver mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention activities. These professionals are already in place, so there is little capital expenditure required to set up the service, however, they will need to be resourced appropriately and the numbers doubled. The NSW Coroners' court, APACS and the Australian Psychological Society all recommend a student counsellor ratio of 1:500. The American Counsellors Association recommend a ratio of 1:250 students.

## **2. Effective system-wide strategies for encouraging resilience ....**

We are very pleased that the Select Committee has recognised that promotion of mental health and suicide prevention is increasingly a major public health problem. Suicide is often hard to predict. School psychologists and counsellors have specialist skills and knowledge to gather information about a student's clinical features and to use this information in a support or treatment plan.

There has been a push recently for schools to develop universal approaches to build resiliency and wellbeing in students. Universal programs delivered in schools appear to reduce self-harm and/or suicidal ideation. School psychologists and counsellors are best placed to design and deliver emotional resilience programs, considering the school culture, context and risk groups. As a profession, we collaborate with other organisations in the community such as BeYou and Headspace, to deliver preventative evidence based universal programs, as well as

encouraging school leadership teams to embed mental health literacy into the school curriculum and culture.

School psychologists and counsellors as school-based employees, are best placed to implement wrap around support for at-risk students, implement individual case management from within the school and engage external providers for support. They can provide this while the student is still engaged at school as they have direct links to classroom teachers, school supports and immediate data to make just-in-time adjustments to the support plan.

Currently, school psychologists and counsellors are often taken off critical mental health promotion and intervention work to undertake assessments and diagnoses for disability funding or write complex behavioural management plans. School psychologists and counsellors need to be adequately resourced on the recommended ratio of 1 school psychologist/counsellor to 500 students, an increase of 100%.

### **3. Building on the work of the Mental Health Workforce Taskforce....**

We cannot comment on the roles, training and standards of allied health professionals, however, we can provide commentary on the role, training and expertise of the school psychologist and counsellor. The Australian Psychological Society and APACS agree that the school psychologist/counsellor is the leading health expert in the school setting. They have usually studied behaviour, brain, memory, learning, human development and psychopathology and mental health. School counsellors generally have post graduate master qualifications for professional membership. Both school psychologists and counsellors are experts in helping children, adolescents and young people, families, parents and teachers to support young people at school in their mental health, in the community and prepare them for their life long journey.

It is possible that there is a perception in the community that clinical psychologists are better trained or more appropriate to work in schools with children and adolescents and are the only ones who understand mental health problems. It is usually the case that all psychologists have training in psychopathology and mental health difficulties.

School psychologists usually have training and knowledge in the school setting and their expertise is with the early childhood, school years and adolescent phases of development. They are the ideal workforce to lead the mental health and suicide promotion, prevention and early intervention work in schools. To facilitate this, APACS believes that there should be national mandates for schools to provide appropriately qualified personnel when it comes to mental health programs or services of prevention, detection and intervention. The creation of standardised accreditation and training by a national body to umbrella and monitor cross-state and territory school needs would ensure national standards across primary and secondary, government and independent school sectors.

#### **4. Funding arrangements for all mental health services....**

School settings play a critical role in mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention. School psychologists and counsellors can provide targeted responses to students and educators on mental health difficulties, while keeping the student engaged in their learning and engaged socially with their peers. They can provide professional training, clear guidelines, processes and policies to support struggling students while also supporting their teachers and parents. Wellbeing is enhanced if strong relationships exist between the school, the family and the community.

School psychologists and counsellors are the designated mental health professionals within the school and if properly resourced, are the professionals with the skills and expertise to write comprehensive wellbeing plans for students, evaluate school and community data to implement quality evidence-based resiliency and wellbeing programs and are responsible for planning and coordinating wellbeing activities, complex case management and student support.

The current mental health system is sometimes hard to access and is reported to be fragmented in service provision. School psychologists and counsellors are the critical link between the student, family, community, school and the external support agencies. They usually work in a child centred approach, ensuring equity and ease of access to support to all, are prevention focussed, evidence informed and provide a needs-based service.

External multidisciplinary hubs that require students who are struggling with mental health to leave the school site and their social connections is not practical. Having a group of unknown health professionals come into the school and expect adolescents to access their service is also not practical. Students with mental health difficulties need to know, trust and have confidence the professional understands their situation both at school and at home. The school psychologist and school counsellor are ideally placed to provide this wrap around level of support.

Schools need to be appropriately resourced for adequate school psychology and school counsellor service provision. Early intervention from early childhood into the young adult years will save money later in life.

#### **Conclusion**

APACS promotes the position and would encourage you in your deliberations to consider that school psychologists and school counsellors, who are already in schools, are the most appropriate professionals to provide mental health promotion, prevention early intervention in school settings and support children, adolescents and young people with mental health difficulties. Schools are the logical place for this service and the school psychologist and school counsellor role should be resourced appropriately to the APS, APACS and NSW coroners court finding of 1 school psychologist/counsellor to 500 students, a 100% increase.

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