

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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# Supported Students, Successful Students

## Process evaluation of the expansion to the school counselling service – Final report

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



## Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

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# Table of contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
Supported Students, Successful Students funding package	9
<b>2. Process evaluation of the expansion to the school counselling service</b>	<b>11</b>
Key evaluation questions	11
Methodology	11
Limitations	13
<b>3. How are school counselling services being used by schools and students?</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>4. How have schools implemented the new resources for school counselling services?</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>5. What are the perceived changes to student wellbeing that have occurred in schools as a result of the expansion to the school counselling service workforce?</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>6. What are the perceived differences in the school counselling service roles with and without a teaching qualification?</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>7. What is the role of the Senior Psychologist Education and what are the perceived impacts of the change?</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>8. What is the perceived impact of the scholarship funding on the school counselling staff recruitment strategy?</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>9. Which changes to the school counselling service are working well, and which changes are not working well?</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>10. Key findings and future implications</b>	<b>39</b>
Summary of key findings	39
Future implications	40
<b>Appendix A: Summary of interview questions</b>	<b>42</b>

# List of tables and figures

**Table 1:**  
Interviews undertaken for the evaluation ..... 12

**Figure 1:**  
Number of new student counselling files from 2005-2018.....21

**Table 2:**  
Learning and Wellbeing scholarship recipient statistics .....33

**Table 3:**  
Learning and Wellbeing sponsorship recipient statistics .....34

# Executive summary

## Background

In 2015, the NSW Department of Education (the department) introduced the Supported Students, Successful Students (SSSS) funding package. The expansion to the school counselling service is a key initiative and includes \$80.7 million to employ an extra 236 full-time equivalent school counsellors and/or school psychologists and \$8 million to expand the graduate scholarship program and workforce development scholarships.

To implement this expansion many other concurrent changes had to take place. To further boost the recruitment of school counselling service staff, the department introduced the new school psychologist role. To distribute the new positions fairly across the state, the department developed a new state-based allocation methodology. The expansion and new allocation meant that school counselling service teams and boundaries needed to be reconfigured. To better support school counsellors and school psychologists in their roles, the department transitioned the District Guidance Officer (DGO) role into a new Senior Psychologist Education (SPE) role with an increased focus on providing support to school counsellors and school psychologists, and on undertaking strategic work. Finally the department introduced a new Leader Psychology Practice (LPP) role to better support SPEs.

## Evaluation

This process evaluation addresses the following seven questions:

1. How are school counselling services being used by schools and students?
2. How have schools implemented the new resources for school counselling services?
3. What are the perceived changes to student wellbeing that have occurred in schools as a result of the expansion to the school counselling service workforce?
4. What are the perceived differences in the school counselling service roles with and without a teaching qualification?
5. What is the role of the Senior Psychologist Education, and what are the perceived impacts of the changes to the role?
6. What is the perceived impact of the scholarship funding on the school counselling staff recruitment strategy?
7. Which changes to the school counselling service are working well, and which changes are not working well?

## Methodology

We completed semi-structured interviews with a small purposive random sample of 63 school-based staff and members of the school counselling service over the period Term 4 2017 to Term 2 2019. We also reviewed and summarised available administrative data including recruitment and separations, scholarships and sponsorships, and the number of new case files. Finally we developed a case study to illustrate the benefits of the expansion. We did not proceed with surveys that we had planned for Term 2 2019 because subsequent major changes to the school counselling service took place just before this time, that would have influenced the reliability of responses.

## Summary of key findings

### **How are school counselling services being used by schools and students?**

Students who access the school counselling service typically require intervention, assessment, and/or referral to external services. Interviewees consistently spoke of mental health concerns becoming more prevalent in schools and identified anxiety as the most common reason that students present to the school counselling service. The school counselling service spends considerable time managing crises and referring students who require long term support to external services. It appears that only a minority of schools are benefiting from early intervention work due to time constraints.

### **How have schools implemented the new resources for school counselling services?**

Many schools that we spoke to in 2017 and 2018 had not yet been able to fully access their new school counselling service resources. This was because the large-scale school counselling service recruitment task (undertaken concurrently with other major changes to the school counselling service) was still underway in 2018 and because many school counselling service staffing movements had ensued from the recruitment. This was a source of frustration for staff in these schools. At schools that have had an increase in school counsellor/psychologist time, we heard that more students are accessing the school counselling service or accessing a greater level of support. In some cases, preventative work is now taking place. School counsellors and school psychologists undertake the same duties, and schools are drawing on the different set of experiences each bring to the role. Despite the intended change to release SPEs from direct service, many SPE were continuing to provide direct service to schools due to staffing vacancies in their teams.

### **What are the perceived changes to student wellbeing that have occurred in schools as a result of the expansion to the school counselling service workforce?**

Many schools that we spoke to in 2017 and 2018 had not yet benefited from increased school counselling service time. In schools that had experienced an increase in counsellor/psychologist time, staff reported reduced waitlists and wait times, more students being supported, better management of crisis incidents, better follow-up and liaison with external services, and sometimes an increase in early intervention initiatives. Department data also shows that the annual number of new case files opened has increased from 28,001 in 2015 (pre SSSS) to 37,796 in 2018. However, the school counselling service has been stretched in areas where vacancies remain, and even with an expanded service there is unmet demand in many schools.

### **What are the perceived differences in the roles of the school counselling service staff with and without a teaching qualification?**

The large majority of principals, SPEs and LPPs that we consulted believe that school counselling service staff with and without a teaching qualification perform similar functions, and are equally effective in their roles, if they develop a good understanding of how schools work. School psychologists are valued for the complementary skills and experience that they bring to the school counselling service. The areas that some stakeholders identify for improvement relate to a lack of prior classroom and departmental experience – but many view this as temporary.

### **What is the role of the Senior Psychologist Education, and what are the perceived impacts of the changes to the role?**

On paper the SPE role has no direct service, but in practice this has been a significant component of work for many, due to staffing vacancies. Even so, while typically under considerable time pressure, SPEs have consistently prioritised clinical supervision and support of counselling staff, and school counselling service staff report feeling well supported by their SPE. Over time SPEs and LPPs believe the changes to the role will improve the school counselling service, but many SPEs were yet to experience the full changes in practice, due to their need to continue providing direct service. SPEs have navigated a stressful period of unprecedented growth in the service, while implementing the many concurrent on-the-ground service changes and supporting several new school counselling service staff in their teams. However, they have felt well-supported by the new LPP role and have welcomed having ready access to training and resources.

### **What is the perceived impact of the scholarship funding on the school counselling recruitment strategy?**

The additional scholarship program has so far led to 40 permanent appointments to the school counselling service, and the new tailored Master of Professional Psychology (School Psychology) program introduced in 2019 has been particularly successful in attracting applicants. The full benefits of this initiative will be realised in years to come as they are new staff and require additional support from SPEs in their early years. One way to strengthen the program is to ensure information regarding geographic boundaries and transfer processes is clearly communicated and understood.

From 2016 to 2019 the sponsorship program supported 194 teachers to retrain as school counsellors, with 94 of these funded by SSSS. Some stakeholders pointed to the lack of post-study financial incentives as a barrier to more applicants. The workforce development scholarships are highly valued and 372 of these had been awarded as at July 2019.

## Which changes to the school counselling service are working well, and which changes are not working well?

We identified three changes working well and three not working well. Changes working well include: the department's strong and highly visible commitment to expanding the school counselling service, along with the tireless efforts of the school counselling service (in particular SPEs) and State Office team to implement the expansion; the introduction of the school psychologist role that has broadened the recruitment pool for the school counselling service and brought in valued complementary skills and experience; and the introduction of the new LPP role which supports SPEs in their role and enhances the department's ability to plan strategically for the school counselling service.

The changes that have not worked well include: the initial letter to principals that communicated ambitious timelines regarding the filling of allocations within schools; the consultation process that some principals and members of the school counselling service perceived as too narrow, in particular regarding the changes to the allocation methodology; and some aspects of the orientation and support for school psychologists that could be enhanced.

## Future implications

The changes implemented under SSSS are the most significant that the school counselling service has ever seen, and the benefits for students, schools and the school counselling service will likely be long lasting. The department has funded 236 new school counselling service positions, an expansion of the school counselling service by 30%. To implement this expansion many other changes had to take place. To increase the supply of school counselling service staff, the department introduced the new school psychologist role and expanded the graduate scholarship and sponsorship opportunities. To distribute the new positions fairly across the state, the department developed a new state-based allocation methodology. The expansion and new allocation meant that school counselling service teams and boundaries needed to be reconfigured. To better support school counsellors and school psychologists in their roles, the department transitioned the DGO role into a new SPE role with an increased focus on providing support to school counsellors and psychologists, and on undertaking strategic work. Finally the department introduced a new LPP role to better support SPEs and to drive improvements across the school counselling service.

It is important to recognise that implementing change at this scale has been challenging and often stressful for school counselling service staff. It has also been a difficult period for many school communities that have waited a long time for their allocation to be filled, or that have experienced ongoing service gaps arising from staffing movements.

We have interviewed 63 principals, teachers and members of the school counselling service about the expansion and its perceived impacts. Stakeholders unanimously and vigorously supported the need for this expansion and several articulated the positive changes that have started to occur. Interviewees in schools that had experienced an increase in counsellor/psychologist time reported reduced waitlists and wait times, more students being supported, better management of crisis incidents, better follow-up and liaison with external services, and sometimes an increase in early intervention initiatives. The reported increase in capacity is also supported by department data showing a sharp rise in the number of new counselling files opened since the expansion. In counselling teams that have few resourcing gaps, school counselling service staff report that SPEs are providing better supervision and support to their team. SPEs also report that the introduction of the LPP role has been of great benefit to them with improved supervision and support taking place. This role also strengthens the department's ability to make strategic improvements to the school counselling service.

However, at the time of interviews many schools were yet to experience their increase in school counselling service time. At the end of 2019, Learning and Wellbeing confirmed that all 236 positions have now been filled (although some of the occupants may be on leave or relieving elsewhere, creating flow-on vacancies). It will take time before positive changes arising from the expansion are consistent across areas and schools. This is because: recruitment timeframes have varied across areas; there has been extensive flow-on recruitment activity arising from staffing movements; and there are workforce challenges with many staff nearing retirement age or just starting families. Meanwhile, the number of students presenting with wellbeing and other counselling support needs at schools is rising, often beyond even the expanded capacity of the school counselling service. We spoke with many schools that had gained more school counsellor/psychologist time that still felt in need of much more support.

We have not measured the prevalence of perceived impacts through the surveys that we had planned (with principals, school counsellors, school psychologists), because more changes to the school counselling service and staffing movements took place before we commenced this work. Further, we have not undertaken outcome analyses drawing on the department's whole-school measures of student wellbeing (from the *Tell Them From Me* student survey; *TTFM*) as this data would represent all students, not those in need of school counselling service support. We suspect, however, that it would be too soon to detect changes at a system-level for the reasons outlined above.

Therefore, the addition of a subsequent 55 positions to the school counselling service in early 2019, and the 2019 election commitment of another (up to) 100 school counselling service positions to better support secondary schools, are very positive developments for schools. However, some concerns will likely remain that challenges outlined in this report may apply to future expansion efforts. The feedback we have gathered from schools and the school counselling service in this evaluation will be useful to inform the remaining planning activities. In particular:

- Principals and school counselling service staff seek clear communication regarding implementation timeframes and any necessary transitional arrangements, and further opportunity to identify and discuss on-the-ground implications.
- Senior school counselling service staff highlight the need to allow for flexibility at the local level when implementing allocations, in order to address unusual or unexpected elements of school complexity (for example, schools with highly fluctuating enrolments, specific traumatic events).
- Principals seek consistency over time wherever feasible, and expressed a preference to be supported by a single school counselling service staff member.

The school psychologist role is a valuable addition to the school counselling service workforce that complements the skills and experience of school counsellors. Its introduction has also greatly facilitated the recruitment of 236 new positions. (This is evident from the department's initial recruitment round for school counsellors in which 11 appointments were made, many of whom were existing school counselling service members). The department has developed a good induction procedure following refinements over time, but more can be done to support school psychologists in their transition to a school environment. Options include providing ongoing induction and orientation sessions across their first year, developing more written guidance to navigate departmental processes, providing shadowing opportunities, and providing advice to principals regarding effective school-based induction procedures.

Finally, the scholarship and sponsorship initiatives are successfully leading to numerous permanent appointments per year, and these would be further strengthened by ensuring information regarding geographic boundaries and transfer or merit selection processes is clearly communicated.



# 1. Introduction

## Supported Students, Successful Students funding package

In 2015, the NSW Department of Education (the department) introduced the Supported Students, Successful Students (SSSS) funding package, which commits \$167 million over four years to counselling and wellbeing services as part of the National Education Reform Agreement (NERA).<sup>1</sup> SSSS aims to support schools to promote student character and wellbeing, help create safer school environments, counter inappropriate behaviours, and more effectively engage with vulnerable students. New resources under the initiative include:

- \$80.7 million to employ an extra 236 full-time equivalent school counsellors and/or school psychologists
- \$51.5 million of flexible funding for wellbeing services equivalent to an additional 200 Student Support Officers (SSOs)
- \$15 million to support schools to implement a comprehensive and inclusive whole school approach to Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) – funding that will employ an additional 36 PBL executive positions including 4 deputy principal PBL positions and 32 PBL coach mentors
- \$8 million to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families
- \$4 million to support refugee students and their families
- \$8 million for graduate scholarships to boost the recruitment of staff for the school counselling service.

SSSS is complemented by the Wellbeing Framework for Schools,<sup>2</sup> which defines wellbeing as the quality of a person's life, focusing upon the subjective feeling of pleasure and the capacity to function effectively. The Wellbeing Framework for Schools articulates how the department will support and improve student wellbeing through the interconnected themes of Connect, Succeed and Thrive.

SSSS extends the range of services and initiatives that the department provides to support wellbeing in schools, such as Learning and Wellbeing Coordinators, Liaison Officers, Student Wellbeing Support Officers, Schools as Community Centres projects, the National School Chaplaincy Program and Healthy Canteens.

The Learning and Wellbeing branch (Learning and Wellbeing) has responsibility for administering initiatives funded through SSSS.

## SSSS funding to expand the school counselling service in NSW public schools

SSSS included \$80.7 million to increase the size of the school counselling service by 30%. This included an additional 236 FTE school counselling staff, comprising 216 new school counsellors and/or school psychologists and 20 new Senior Psychologists Education (SPE). This increased the number of school counselling service positions from 790 to 1,026.

The department concurrently implemented other changes to the school counselling service as part of the overall expansion to the service. Together the changes arguably represent the most comprehensive reform to the school counselling service since its establishment. They are summarised below and discussed in more detail in the main findings of this report:

- implementation of a new state-based school counselling allocation methodology to determine how to allocate the expanded FTEs across individual schools for the period 2016 to 2018. This replaced the previous regionally-based allocation methodology. The result was an increase in allocation at 1,242 schools, no change at 735 schools, and a slight decrease in allocation at 189 schools

<sup>1</sup> For details on the NERA: [http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/national\\_agreements/past/national-education-agreement.pdf](http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/national_agreements/past/national-education-agreement.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> For details on the Wellbeing Framework: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/whole-school-approach/wellbeing-framework-for-schools>

- changes to teams and boundaries as a result of the expanded service and changes to school counselling staff at individual schools
- the introduction of school psychologists to the workforce
- the replacement of the District Guidance Officer (DGO) role with the Senior Psychologist Education (SPE) role
- the introduction of the Leader Psychology Practice (LPP) role to provide support and clinical supervision to the SPEs
- \$8 million to expand the existing graduate scholarships and sponsorships programs to boost the recruitment of school counselling service staff.

## 2. Process evaluation of the expansion to the school counselling service

The Learning and Wellbeing branch invited the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) to evaluate the expansion to the school counselling service as part of a suite of evaluations of the SSSS package. CESE and Learning and Wellbeing developed the scope and methodology collaboratively.

### Key evaluation questions

The seven process evaluation questions are:

1. How are school counselling services being used by schools and students?
2. How have schools implemented the new resources for school counselling services?
3. What are the perceived changes to student wellbeing that have occurred in schools as a result of the expansion to the school counselling service workforce?
4. What are the perceived differences in school counselling service roles with and without a teaching qualification?
5. What is the role of the Senior Psychologist Education, and what are the perceived impacts of the changes to the role?
6. What is the perceived impact of the scholarship funding on the school counselling staff recruitment strategy?
7. Which changes to the school counselling service are working well, and which changes are not working well?

### Methodology

The methodology for this process evaluation was primarily qualitative, comprising two rounds of semi-structured interviews with a purposive random sample of school-based staff and members of the school counselling service, and development of a case study to highlight good practice. We also reviewed and summarised available administrative data including recruitment and separations, scholarships and sponsorships, and the number of new case files. We had also planned to implement a suite of surveys, but we did not proceed with these for reasons outlined below.

#### Qualitative interviews

We completed the first round of interviews in Term 4 2017 and Term 1 2018, and the second round of interviews in Terms 3 and 4 2018. We conducted interviews for the case study in Term 2 2019.

For both rounds of interviews we invited a sample of principals, school counsellors and psychologists, and Leaders Psychology Practice (LPPs) to participate in a detailed interview of approximately 30 minutes. Prospective participants were selected randomly from a list that we stratified according to metropolitan or non-metropolitan school location, school type and size of school counselling service allocation change. In round 1 we invited 30 school principals and 90 school counselling service staff members. In round 2 we invited 40 school principals and 100 school counselling service staff members. Table 1 provides the final sample for both interview rounds.

**Table 1:**

Interviews undertaken for the evaluation

	Round 1	Round 2	Case study	Total
School-based staff:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 7 principals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 principals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 principal</li> <li>• 1 deputy principal</li> <li>• 1 head teacher wellbeing</li> </ul>	18
School counselling service staff:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 school counsellors</li> <li>• 3 school psychologists</li> <li>• 9 SPEs</li> <li>• 7 LPPs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 school counsellors</li> <li>• 7 school psychologists</li> <li>• 7 LPPs</li> <li>• 1 recently appointed SPE3</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 school psychologist</li> </ul>	45

We did not invite schools that had no change or decline to their school counselling service allocation to interview, as there were sensitivities regarding the change to the allocation methodology that were being addressed at the time. We approached the qualitative data analysis knowing that the non-positive perspective of this group of schools was not represented in our data. However, it is fair to argue that if the improvements to the school counselling service were not occurring as intended within the schools that we interviewed, they would not be occurring in all other NSW public schools.

We used semi-structured interview guides for each participant type which included a range of demographic, knowledge, experience, belief and probing questions and digitally recorded and later transcribed all interviews. We used NVivo to code and manage the interview transcripts and we analysed the data using both content and thematic approaches, where relevant. Rather than interpreting and presenting the perspectives of the various stakeholders separately, their comments were triangulated to improve the credibility of the identified themes.

### Development of a case study

The intent of the case study was to illustrate good practice in implementing the expanded school counselling service resources. We sought suggestions for three suitable schools from Leaders Psychology Practice. We proceeded with one secondary girls high school and did not proceed with other suggested schools due to recent staffing changes that would have made participation difficult.

Following appropriate approvals, in Term 2 2019 we visited the school and interviewed the principal, deputy principal learning and wellbeing, school psychologist and head teacher wellbeing. We then employed the same approach to coding and analysis as identified above and we drafted a case study. We invited interviewees to provide feedback on the case study prior to its inclusion in the final report.

### Review of administrative data

We reviewed information and statistics provided to us from Human Resources (HR) and from Learning and Wellbeing pertaining to recruitment and separations, the SSSS Graduate Scholarship Program, the School Counsellor Sponsorship Program, the SSSS Workforce Development Scholarships and the number of new case files over time. Where available this information was provided to us at different points in time. System limitations meant that we were unable to access some of the information that we sought out.

### Modifications to the methodology – withdrawal of survey component

We intended to administer surveys in the first half of 2019, to a large sample of principals, school counsellors, school psychologists and SPEs. We designed the surveys with a particular focus on the perceived impacts of the expansion to the school counselling service at an individual school level. However, we did not proceed because further significant changes to the school counselling service were implemented in early 2019 that would have influenced responses.

In late 2018, the NSW Government allocated an additional \$6.2 million for 55 FTE new school counselling service positions for the period 2019 to 2021. The department recruited these positions in Term 1 2019 and after applying the counselling allocation methodology, this additional capacity was spread across 456 schools. Many more schools were impacted by the changes because the recruitment activity resulted in staffing movements that required subsequent recruitment. This meant it would have been very difficult for survey participants to comment meaningfully on changes that took place under SSSS.

<sup>3</sup> In consultation with Learning and Wellbeing we decided not to invite SPEs to participate in the second round of interviews due to external factors that were impacting on their workload at that time. The LPPs that we interviewed provided detailed information on these issues.

In addition, in February 2019, Premier Berejiklian made an election commitment to fund the employment of up to 100 additional full-time school counsellors or psychologists, as well as 350 SSOs, across NSW public high schools. Discussions about these new positions commenced in Term 2 2019 and would have further impacted on any survey data collected.

### **Exploration of outcome analyses drawing on the department's annual *Tell Them From Me* student engagement and wellbeing data**

We explored the possibility of undertaking outcome analyses drawing on the department's annual *Tell Them From Me (TTFM)* student survey to measure the impact of the expansion on student wellbeing. We determined not to proceed with these analyses because they would not provide meaningful results. This is primarily because it is not possible to isolate survey results to the portion of students within a given school who are in need of the school counselling service.

### **Limitations**

Consistent with guidelines for the ethical conduct of evaluation, all participants in this evaluation opted-in voluntarily. A large proportion (80%) of the principals, school counsellors and psychologists that we invited to interview did not respond to our invitation (or follow up reminders). We believe this is a reflection of the time demands on the school counselling service and other issues that are discussed in this report. While several consistent themes were evident through the interviews, we note that the views expressed may not be representative of the broader school principal and school counselling service population. We did not measure the prevalence of stakeholder views in broader surveys for the reasons outlined above.

### 3. How are school counselling services being used by schools and students?

In this chapter we discuss the work the school counselling service performs within schools, noting that this work depends on the school context, the needs of the students, the external services that are available within the community, and the extent to which the school counselling service allocation is filled.

#### Students who access the school counselling service typically require intervention assessment and/or case management

##### Assessment and intervention

Assessment and intervention is the core service that school psychologists and school counsellors provide across all school types. Typically this is at an individual level but in certain contexts there is the capacity to conduct group interventions or whole of school wellbeing programs. Individual treatment and intervention is accompanied by time spent writing case notes.

Typical types of assessments carried out by the school counselling service include mental health, learning difficulties, cognitive, behaviour and suicide risk. Conducting these assessments and preparing the corresponding report is time consuming and many school counselling service staff described finding the time to write reports during school hours as challenging.

##### Case management and consultation

Case management involves liaising, consulting and collaborating with other agencies and services that are providing support to particular students. Developing strong links and relationships is necessary for optimal student support but can be logistically difficult and time consuming. While case management occurs across all school types, it is a prominent feature of the work of school counsellors and psychologists servicing schools for specific purposes (SSPs), as many students are receiving support from multiple external agencies.

In addition to liaising with external services, school counselling staff regularly consult with teaching staff and parents of students who access the school counselling service. The nature of these consultations include understanding how the student behaves across contexts, keeping others informed, checking in on progress and developments within the classroom, and upskilling where required to ensure consistency of wellbeing support across settings.

#### Students are increasingly accessing the school counselling service for mental health concerns, especially anxiety

A consistent theme across interviews was that mental health concerns are becoming more prevalent amongst the student population, and that students are presenting with some concerns earlier in life than previously observed by school staff.

“The school counselling service is vitally important, no matter what size of school you're in or where it is, given the increasing complexity of the students that we are teaching nowadays. We have a lot more students who have got a lot more identified mental health issues. In the country, it is quite often unidentified mental health issues, or probably undiagnosed mental health issues that could quite easily be diagnosed. We need that support to be able to support our kids in their learning.”  
[Central school principal]

Among the school principals and school counselling service staff interviewed, anxiety was the most frequently reported reason for students accessing the school counselling service across all school types. Some school counselling service staff noted that they had students presenting with anxiety as early as Year one. Anxiety was commonly mentioned in combination with suicidal ideation and behaviour, self-harm, family issues and depression. A number of interviewees described occasions when students had been admitted to hospital for evaluation or had made suicide attempts.

One secondary school principal commented: “Without counsellors, I think we would have had a couple of incidents here. We’ve managed to avert suicides through the efforts of our counsellors.”

Support with managing stress is another key reason why students are accessing the school counselling service, and often this has arisen from learning issues, examination pressures or friendship issues.

“It could be stress about family, stress from friends, bullying allegations or issues with getting on with friends and how you’re to deal with it, coping skills ... helping them prepare for examinations and deal with the stress.” [School counsellor]

Many students who use the school counselling service self-refer (more so in secondary schools) but staff-referral and parent-referral is also common.

### Responding to student crises comprise a significant amount of the school counselling service’s work

Many of the school psychologists and school counsellors we interviewed described spending the majority of their workday attending to student crises. Examples of crises include responding to suicidal ideation and behaviour, self-harm, child protection and emergency care situations, and anxiety relating to the family context. Many school counselling service staff explained that crisis management work often displaces time that was intended to be spent on assessments, reports and early intervention.

“I have literally a line-up of people every morning waiting to talk to me, and that’s from quarter-to 8 in the morning till 4.30 in the afternoon. I have no choice but to be reactive.” [School counsellor]

### Students who require long term treatment are typically referred to external services, but there are very limited options in many areas

Many of the school counselling service staff interviewed commented that they refer between one third and one half of their incoming students to external services, when they do not have enough time to provide the support that the students need. This is particularly the case for students requiring long term support.

“They’ve got a full-time load...so someone’s there every day. But because of the sheer number we’re doing a lot of external referrals to outside agencies because we are just limited; we just don’t have capacity in a school day to see as many kids who we get referrals for.” [School psychologist]

Examples of external services frequently mentioned by school counselling service staff included Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Headspace, Barnardos, university clinics and the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS). Lengthy wait times at external services have resulted in some school counselling service staff advising parents to see their local GP for a referral to a private counsellor or psychologist, but the cost of this type of support is a barrier for many families.

Many school counselling service staff, and particularly those in rural and remote schools, reported that the limited availability of local services constrains the referrals that they can provide. In some instances, this leads to students being primarily supported by teaching staff within the school and/or community youth workers who do not have formal mental health qualifications.

“And I guess the difficulty with this area is we’re limited with where we can refer. There is a CAMHS, but it kind of gets tricky if they don’t accept them; then the student is required to kind of seek out a mental health plan and go to a private psychologist. There’s no Headspace or one of those organisations that can be really helpful as like an ‘in the middle’ option.” [School psychologist]

## Only a minority of schools are benefiting from early intervention work because school counselling service staff are typically too constrained for time

All school counselling service interviewees highlighted the importance and desire that they have for conducting early intervention work. In this context, early intervention includes providing preventative interventions to students who are either at-risk or beginning to show early signs of needing support. Only a few school counselling service staff mentioned that they were able to carry out this kind of work with the majority of school counselling service staff noting time constraints as the most significant barrier.

“We do rely a lot on teachers to pick things up earlier. ... There's a lot of staff that have been really good at doing that and getting it in a bit earlier. But, the problem is, then, that there's others that are more urgent. So, you can't always see the less urgent, early intervention kind of stuff.”  
[School psychologist]



## 4. How have schools implemented the new resources for school counselling services?

This chapter explores the way in which schools have implemented the new resources, but firstly explains the complexity of the implementation task which impacted on timelines.

### The scale and complexity of the implementation task prevented many schools from accessing their new resources for some time

It is important to convey the scale of change that has occurred in expanding the school counselling service. Recruiting 236 new staff members is a significant undertaking in and of itself, and this occurred concurrently with introducing the new school psychologist role to the workforce, and implementing a new counselling allocation methodology which required significant changes to teams and boundaries. Recruitment of this scale also led to staffing movements within the service. Anecdotally<sup>4</sup> we heard that many existing school counsellors applied for positions (and were successful) in a location that was better suited to their circumstances. In addition the majority of the SPE positions were filled by existing school counsellors. Added to this complexity were the existing workforce planning challenges of large numbers of school counselling service staff nearing retirement age and the high prevalence of part-time arrangements, maternity leave and long service leave. We know from HR data that 62 members of the school counselling service retired in 2016 and 2017, and a further 47 separated from the service during this time. This is consistent with attrition rates for other positions in the department.

Schools, however, were not aware of the scale and complexity of these changes. In December 2015 principals received a letter that advised them of their school counselling allocation for 2016 to 2018. The letter also advised that the allocation would be available from Term 3 2016. During consultations with principal groups the advice was there would be a transition to implementation across three years, but the letter did not clearly convey this idea. This set high expectations of a rapid timeframe for implementation which was not achievable in the circumstances.

When we conducted our first round of interviews (Term 1 2018), many principals that we spoke to did not have their full allocation filled. This was due to new positions not yet being filled, or to subsequent staffing movements, or unfilled long term leave or part time arrangements. In some instances schools at that point in time were experiencing reduced levels of resourcing. Many principals expressed frustrations by the perceived delay in the rollout of the expansion. The situation was most pronounced in rural and remote areas.

When we conducted our second round of interviews (Term 3 2018), the large majority of new positions had been recruited<sup>5</sup>, but many schools were still experiencing gaps in service due to staffing movements or long term leave. Prior to the expansion there existed a mobile school counsellor workforce that enabled such positions to be more readily backfilled, but this system has ceased. Some schools that had not received their full allocation reported they were able to access alternative resources in the meantime (for example, a welfare teacher, a youth worker), but explained that the services they can provide are limited.

Perceived implementation issues aside, principals and school counselling service staff were unanimous in their support of an expanded school counselling service and in confirming the need for the expansion.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics on staffing movements are not available.

<sup>5</sup> As at December 2018, 223.5 FTE out of the 236 new positions had been recruited.

## Many schools experienced 'new resources' more saliently as a change in personnel rather than an increase in resources

The expansion to the school counselling service led to many changes in the specific individuals that serviced particular schools. For many principals we spoke to, the change in personnel was the most salient change they experienced from the expansion. They found it difficult to differentiate changes that resulted from an increase in their school counselling allocation from changes arising from personnel change.

For example, one principal that we spoke to had an increase in allocation from 0.65 to 0.9 FTE which occurred concurrently with a change in personnel from one existing school counsellor to two new school counsellors. The principal reported that the new school counsellors were a much better fit, leading to significant improvements to the service and students proactively seeking out counselling. The principal had difficulty, however, identifying the specific change arising from the increase in overall resourcing.

A change in personnel can also be a negative experience for schools, and several principals emphasised the importance of consistency in personnel and the negative impact of loss of strong relationships that have been built over time.

"Well, one of the things is about stability. Once they get to know the environment of the school and the kids, long term stability is very, very important ..." [Secondary school principal]

## At schools with an increase in school counselling service time, more students are accessing the school counselling service or accessing a greater level of support. Sometimes schools are benefiting from preventative work.

Where schools have received an expanded school counselling service allocation and there has been success in filling those positions, principals and school counselling service staff report that a greater number of students are able to access the school counselling service. Alternatively, they report that those students who do access the school counselling service are receiving a greater level of support or better planned support because there is more time to focus on individual student needs.

"It's had a really good impact on the work that the school counselling service can do at the school, because they have two people here...I think it's really enabled us to more effectively plan for students that are coming in from complex situations like the adolescent day unit, which is at \_\_\_\_\_ Hospital. So, we've been able to kind of put some plans into place to support those students coming in ... there are more hours available for that kind of stuff to happen." [School counsellor]

We heard some examples where the school counselling service had been able to implement preventative or early intervention services as a result of the increased resourcing, but more commonly school counselling service staff said they still did not have the capacity to do this. Indeed, many said they were still having difficulty meeting demands, which are increasing over time.

## Schools are using school psychologists in similar ways to school counsellors but they are drawing on the different set of experiences that school psychologists bring

Interviews suggest that school psychologists are, on the whole, undertaking the same work as school counsellors. However, they are typically coming to schools with a different set of experiences. For example, some school principals who had a school psychologist at their school commented that their school was benefiting from the psychologists' in depth knowledge of external services and particular expertise in interventions and knowledge of trauma. They also identified areas for development, such as understanding where students should be tracking developmentally and how behaviours change in a classroom context. Chapter 6 explores these views and experiences in detail along with the perceived differences in the school psychologist and school counselling role.

## Despite the change from the DGO role to the SPE role, many schools were expecting the role to remain the same, including providing direct service

At the time of our interviews, most SPEs were not carrying out their role as it was intended because they typically had vacancies in their team and so were having to provide direct service. This meant that many schools were interacting with their SPE in the same way they had done with their DGO.

Very few principals that we interviewed had an understanding of the scope of the intended changes from DGO role to SPE role, beyond the intent for SPEs to cease direct service. Principals' views on ceasing direct service were generally negative, particularly if they had previously had this type of support from their DGO.

For some principals who had experienced persistent gaps in their school counselling service, one change in the way they were interacting with their SPE was a more strained relationship. These principals were frustrated with the ongoing vacancy at their school and were frustrated that their SPE was unable to resolve the issue.

We did, however, hear from some school counsellors whose team had few gaps and whose SPE did have additional time to provide them with more supervision and support.

Chapter 6 discusses in detail the perceived impacts of the new SPE role.

## 5. What are the perceived changes to student wellbeing that have occurred in schools as a result of the expansion to the school counselling service workforce?

This chapter answers this question based on qualitative interviews that we conducted with principals, teachers and members of the school counselling service in 2017 and 2018. We also draw on department data regarding the number of new case files opened each year. We conclude with a case study of the positive changes at one secondary girls school that experienced an increase in school counsellor/psychologist time.

Many of the schools that we interviewed in 2017 and 2018 had not yet experienced an increase in school counselling service time and so had not observed changes to student wellbeing

We interviewed principals, teachers and members of the school counselling service in Term 4 2017, Term 1 2018 and in Term 3 2018. As was discussed in Chapter 3, many schools had not yet experienced an increase in school counselling service time (either because their counselling allocation was not yet filled, or because subsequent staffing movements had left them with a service gap) and so they had not observed any changes to student wellbeing.

Staff at schools that did receive an increase in school counselling service time reported that students and staff were better supported

Where schools had received their full (expanded) school counselling service allocation, principals and school counselling service staff perceived that the expansion had a positive impact on both staff and students.

Examples of improved support to students include:

- reduced wait lists and waiting times
- an increase in the number of students being supported by the school counselling service
- student crises being dealt with in a more timely manner by members of the school counselling service rather than teachers or support staff without mental health training

“We feel that the students are so much better supported, because we have five day a week counselling. Because when we didn’t ... then that load of complex counselling, and we’re not psychologists we’re teachers, would fall on the shoulders of the head teacher wellbeing or the year advisor, who of course felt very inadequate.” [Secondary school principal]

- better connections being established with external services and more timely and effective referrals;
- in some cases, school counselling service staff having the capacity to provide early intervention services.

Examples of improved support to teachers include:

- teaching staff feeling reassured that they have greater access to expert help to address student mental health concerns
- teaching staff receiving more classroom behaviour management support
- teaching staff accessing mental health awareness training from the school counselling service staff.

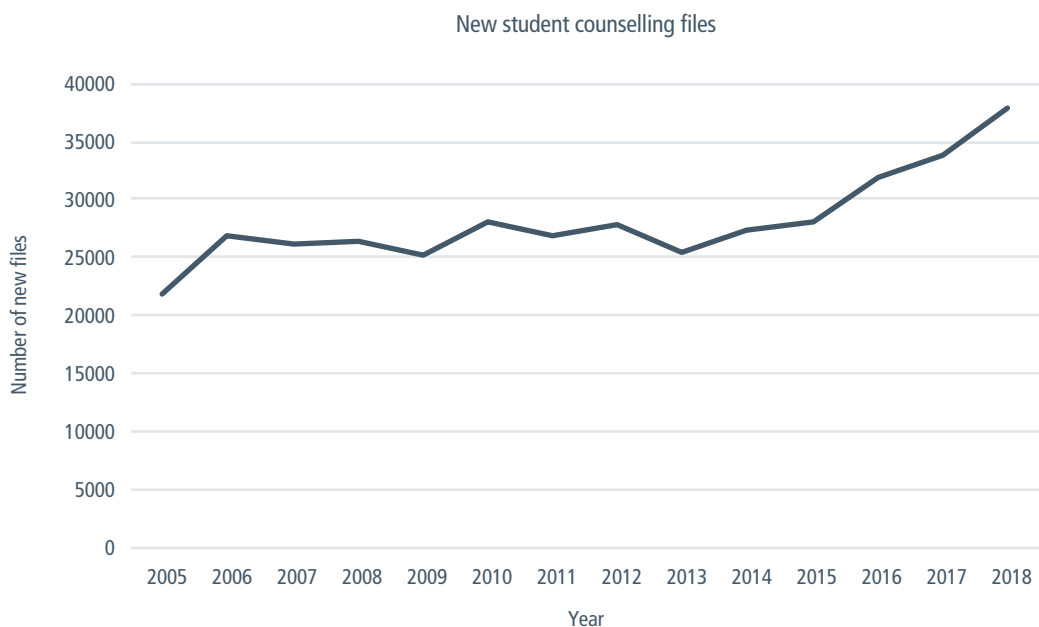
“I think it’s freed up both sides. I think it’s freed up both the counselling side, and the wellbeing, the head teacher of wellbeing’s role. Because only having two and a half days of counselling, much more of it falls on the wellbeing teacher. And having five days of counselling means that we can take on much more of a load, but there’s also a lot more communication.” [Head teacher wellbeing]

## There has been an increase in the number of new case files opened state-wide in the time since expanding the school counselling service

Learning and Wellbeing has a central record of the number of new student counselling files opened across the state, dating back to 2005. As shown in Figure 1, the yearly state-wide number of new student counselling files fluctuated and increased modestly from 2006 through to 2015. It then increased notably from 2016 to 2018, coinciding with the expansion to the school counselling service. Preliminary statistics from 2019 indicate that this trend will continue. In Term 1 alone, 12,515 new case files were opened compared to 9,792 in Term 1, 2018 and 8,190 in Term 1, 2017.

This data indicates just a portion of the work that the school counselling service carries out, and it provides no information on the quality of support provided, nor whether the increase occurred within schools that received an expanded service. Nevertheless it further supports the assertion that more students are being supported by the school counselling service.

**Figure 1:**  
Number of new student counselling files from 2005-2018



## The school counselling service has been stretched thin in areas where vacancies remain, and even with an expanded workforce there is unmet demand in many schools

Almost all principals and school counselling service staff commented that they did not feel that the service level was meeting the needs of their students. This included schools that did have their full allocation filled. Many principals and school counselling service staff said that the increased number of students presenting to the school counselling service with complex mental health needs has placed an enormous strain on the system. In some schools there was also a temporary loss of momentum following staffing changes.

“No, nowhere near it [meeting demand]. We could do with more than five days a week, we could do with more than one counsellor. ...because adolescent presentations have become more complex... The expansion of the counselling service has been invaluable, but could be expanded further.” [Secondary school principal]

“So that element of change I think did impact on many counsellors and certainly on a lot of schools as well because schools lost a counsellor that they’d been working with for a fair amount of time.” [SPE]

In some cases, primary students are waiting between two and four weeks and secondary students are waiting at least four weeks before being seen by a school psychologist or school counsellor unless, there is a crisis. There is also a similar timeframe for a follow-up appointment.

Further, some principals and school counselling service staff do not believe that the maximum 1.0 FTE is a reasonable allocation to meet the student demand within large secondary schools and schools with large support units.

Where vacancies remained, SPEs, school psychologists and school counsellors were coordinating together to spread themselves across schools. However, interviewees reported that this often means services are stretched thin, and the amount of support the school counselling service staff can provide to students decreases.

## Looking forward, members of the school counselling service were confident that over time the expansion would deliver considerable benefits to students, staff and the school community

LPPs and SPEs had observed improvements to the support provided to schools in some areas as a result of the expanded service. They believed that, as the vacancies were filled over time, the improvements to the service that had already been observed would extend to other areas. Some school counsellors and SPEs had also experienced improvements in support and supervision which led them to work more proactively, in addition to responding to incidents. Interviewees were confident this was translating to better quality service delivery for students.

“I certainly have seen growth in the school counselling service and I certainly believe that it is improving in terms of the standards and the quality of the delivery.” [SPE]

LPPs and SPEs also articulated that with the introduction of the LPP role there is great potential to improve the quality of the service from a system level. They also conveyed how uplifting and motivating it had been to have had the department invest such a large amount of funds in recognition of the value and importance of the school counselling service. One LPP said “...it’s an exciting time for us. The quality psychological service that we’re aiming for – we’re on the way.”

## The following case study illustrates the positive impacts of the expansion in a secondary girls' school

### Introduction

CESE would like to thank the principal, deputy principal, head teacher wellbeing and school psychologist who provided valuable insight into how the expansion to the school counselling service has impacted their school.

### Background

The following case study illustrates the positive impacts of the expansion in a secondary girls' school to reduce student waiting time to access support and the stigma associated with doing so and enabled the school counselling service time to communicate more effectively with parents and other services and implement early intervention initiatives.

With nearly 1000 students, the expansion led to an increase in school counselling service allocation from two and a half days (0.5 FTE) to five days (1 FTE) per week. This allocation is filled by a school counsellor two days per week and a school psychologist three days per week, both of whom began servicing this school in 2017 (after the expansion). In addition to these roles, the school has a large wellbeing team consisting of a deputy principal of wellbeing, head teacher of wellbeing, six year advisors and six assistant year advisors.

Students commonly present to the school counselling service with anxiety stemming from school work, friendship groups and home life, emotion regulation issues and self-harm behaviours. Services that the school counselling service provide in this case study school include short term treatment or intervention, assessment and consultation with external mental health services and other youth services (for example, relating to accommodation and financial support).

## Positive outcomes of the expansion to the school counselling service

### Reduced waiting lists, increased access to the school counselling service and better follow up

Prior to the expansion, the school counselling service in this case study school was operating as a 'triage system' with an extensive waiting list that prevented timely and productive follow-up. With an increase in allocation of 0.5 FTE, waiting times have substantially decreased enabling more students access to the school counselling service. Further, there is more opportunity for the school counselling service staff to follow up with the students accessing the service for several weeks to ensure that short term intervention strategies are being put into place and/or ensure that referred external services for long term support are being accessed.

### Reduced stigma of accessing the school counselling service

For this school, the increase in allocation has translated to having a school counselling service staff member onsite five days a week which has dramatically increased the visibility of the school counselling service. In addition to being seen more around the school, from time to time, the school counselling service staff are able to speak at school assemblies, PDHPE classes and specialist Year 12 classes. All interviewees noted that the increased access and visibility of the school counselling service has helped reduce the stigma that students sometimes feel when reaching out for help and consequently increased the number of students who self-refer.

### Improved collaborative care through better communication with parents and external services

The increase in allocation has enabled the school counselling service staff more time to focus on collaborative care by meeting with some of the parents of students with the greatest needs and the external service providers that support them. These meetings allow parents to voice their concerns about their child and hear of the support that the student is receiving at school and how they can supplement that support at home. Further, the school counselling service staff liaise with the external services that are providing emergent or long term support to students to discuss progress and in some cases learn how the school counselling service can supplement that support within the school.

### Having time to implement early intervention initiatives

The principal, deputy principal and head teacher wellbeing all commented that one of the greatest benefits of the increase in allocation has been the time to implement both school-wide and grade specific early intervention initiatives.

Many of the school-wide initiatives have been designed to be short and sharp so that they can be consistently implemented into the school day without disrupting the curriculum. Examples of school-wide initiatives include "Wellness Wednesday" and "Friday Feels." During homeroom each Wednesday morning, students will spend approximately five minutes completing a grounding exercise such as meditation or reflective practice such as a gratitude journal. Grounding exercises help anchor the students in the present moment and learn new ways of interrupting thoughts that contribute to stress and anxiety while reflective practice enables students to focus on the positive aspects of their lives. "Friday Feels" is a dance party that occurs during lunchtime each Friday that allows students to unwind from the stress of their week. School counselling service staff anticipate that these school-wide initiatives will, with time, reduce the number of low-level presentations to the school counselling service so that students with more complex needs are able to be seen.

Further, for the first time in the school's history, the school psychologist attended the Year 7 camp this year to conduct a grade specific early intervention initiative. The initiative was broken down into three parts: an information session regarding transitioning to high school and friendships, the tree of life project – a strengths-based approach for reviewing key life experiences, skills, abilities, relationships and future aspirations and, a meditation. Two weeks following the camp, the school psychologist conducted a parent information night that covered similar content regarding transitioning to high school. An outcome of the camp has been the increase in Year 7 students that are accessing the school counselling service to build their anxiety management, time management and friendship and communication skills.

## We did not proceed to quantify stakeholder perceptions because subsequent major changes to the school counselling service took place that would have influenced survey results

We had intended to gather survey feedback from a large sample of principals and school counselling service members in the first half of 2019, with a particular focus on the perceived impacts of the expansion to the school counselling service at an individual school level. We did not proceed with these surveys because further significant changes to the school counselling service took place in early 2019 which would have influenced the reliability of responses. The NSW Government allocated \$6.2 million in additional funding for a further 55 FTE school counselling service positions for the period 2019 to 2021, and the department recruited these positions in early 2019. After applying the counselling allocation methodology, the additional school counselling allocation was spread across 456 schools. In addition, the recruitment resulted in a new set of staffing movements requiring subsequent recruitment activity. For our surveys this meant that it would have been very difficult for participants to comment meaningfully on changes that took place under SSSS.



## 6. What are the perceived differences in the school counselling service roles with and without a teaching qualification?

The department introduced the school psychologist role, alongside the existing school counsellor role, to support the expansion of the school counselling service. The roles perform similar functions but differ in terms of qualifications and employment conditions. Both roles have a focus on providing psychological services.

- **School counsellors** hold qualifications in both teaching and psychology and must be eligible for registration as a psychologist. They are members of the Teaching Service with Teaching Service employment conditions<sup>6</sup>.
- **School psychologists** are registered psychologists or provisionally registered psychologists and they do not require teaching qualifications. They are members of the public service with public service conditions of employment<sup>7</sup>.

In this chapter we discuss the perspectives of those working with school psychologists and with school counsellors.

**On balance, stakeholders believe that school counselling service staff with and without a teaching qualification perform similar functions, and are equally effective in their roles, if they develop a good understanding of how schools work**

We heard wide ranging views regarding the role that a teaching qualification plays as a member of the school counselling service, and sometimes these were very strongly held. On balance though, stakeholders felt that school counselling service staff members performed similar roles, with or without teaching qualifications. None of the principals that we interviewed felt that supporting students effectively was contingent on having a teaching qualification.

“Doesn’t make any difference at all. Not one iota. Our psychologist, she’s fitted in extremely well to the staff as part of the fabric of the school ... Frankly, her knowledge and all that sort of stuff, came to the fore straight away. But so did the other lady [school counsellor]. So they fitted in perfectly.”  
[Principal]

Stakeholders did, however, identify that school psychologists needed to be willing and able to develop a good understanding of how schools work to be successful in their role. This is critical for adjusting to the school context which differs greatly from other organisational contexts, in particular private practice. Some school psychologists have adjusted easily while others have found the transition difficult.

The variation in individual performance and individual personality that occurs naturally within any profession is also worth noting. Several principals that we spoke to recognised that their positive experiences with their new school psychologist may reflect the psychologists’ personal characteristics rather than their qualifications and prior experience.

“A lot comes down to their personality. So we’ve got some amazing school psychologists... And then we’ve still got some that need a lot of support ... I don’t think that it’s to do with the fact that they’re school psychologists. I think it’s more to the fact that it just comes down to personality and their own work ethic.” [LPP]

6 School counsellors are employed under the Teaching Service Act 1980 and the Crown Employees (Teachers in Schools and Related Employees) Salaries and Conditions Award.

7 School psychologists are employed under the Government Sector Employment Act 2013.

The school counsellors that we interviewed explained how their understanding of the school context benefited the support they provide to students and their teachers. However, only some felt that this required a teaching background. Most felt that it could be learnt while in the role.

“I think my teaching degree and my teaching experience has set me up quite successfully to be, I think, quite an efficient counsellor here, and I think the teachers respect me because I have that knowledge. But I also think you can learn a lot on the job ... So even though they haven't got the teaching qualifications, as long as they understand how a school really works, then I can't see a problem with it.” [School counsellor]

## School psychologists are valued for the complementary skills and experience that they bring to the school counselling service

Many stakeholders highlighted the valuable skills and experience that school psychologists bring to the school counselling service, and the benefits of bringing in a new perspective. In particular, principals emphasised their skills in analysing and diagnosing behaviour, identifying appropriate interventions, and their strong connections with external services. Some also felt that prior experience working in private practice had greatly assisted with improving the school's wellbeing policies, processes and access to external services.

“The clinical psychological skills that the school psychologist come in with are absolutely fabulous. They value-add to the professional psychological expertise within my team ... but the deficit is in their lack of corporate knowledge of things within the department.” [SPE]

Many principals that we spoke to had experience working at a school where both a school psychologist and a school counsellor provided services. They explained that school counsellors and school psychologists are providing similar services and in many ways they complemented one another.

“I've got a counsellor, I've got a psychologist. They actually work really well together ... they tag-team, they pass on information. They work out of the same office, but they're rarely here at the same time.” [Secondary school principal]

From the perspective of SPEs and LPPs who had experience working with a number of school counsellors and school psychologists, many commented on the high quality of school psychologists coming through, the new skills and perspectives that they have brought, and the positive feedback received from principals. They also stressed that the additional 236 school counselling service roles could not have been filled without introducing school psychologists.

## Some stakeholders identify a need for school psychologists to strengthen their understanding of classroom practices and departmental processes and procedures - but typically they view this as a temporary situation

For those stakeholders who identified areas for improvement, only a minority felt that these were a cause for concern. The main areas for improvement identified related to learning departmental processes and how services and supports work within schools, such as: which remedial programs were available within each school; which types of funding students may be eligible for, and how to access that funding. One SPE commented: “What they don't have is all of the ins and outs that we as departmental employees take for granted.” Typically, stakeholders viewed this as a temporary situation.

They also identified ways of working that differ in schools compared to other work contexts for psychologists, in particular private practice. Examples included: stricter deadlines for assessments; the limited time available to spend on interventions, and the reactive nature of some of the work. For some school psychologists the experience has been quite different to what they expected and they have not yet adjusted to these differences.

“The other thing that school psychologists often find difficult is just the demanding and reactionary nature of schools and the complexity of schools, and the complexity of their caseloads. If they're experienced psychologists they've usually come out of either private practice or health or somewhere where they made appointments to see clients and saw them for the hour and had time to write up case notes and etcetera, etcetera. And of course they don't get that in schools.” [LPP]

Some other examples related to learning that is gained in the classroom, such as: where students should be tracking developmentally; how behaviours change in a classroom context; what interventions can be carried out at school; what level of communication and feedback to teachers is appropriate.

Most of the school psychologists that we interviewed described experiencing these challenges to varying degrees and described being able to address these by working closely with learning support staff or school counsellors.

“A lot of it [addressing knowledge gaps] was just talking to teachers or people in my team. I found myself doing a lot of self-development in terms of reading up about... making sure I looked into it, and asking questions.” [School psychologist]

Finally there is variation in the level of experience of newly recruited school psychologists, ranging from those commencing as provisional psychologists through to those with extensive years of experience. Those with limited work experience require much more support from their SPE. We heard from a handful of SPEs that this was particularly the case for psychometric assessments.

# 7. What is the role of the Senior Psychologist Education and what are the perceived impacts of the change?

In 2016 the department transitioned the District Guidance Officer (DGO) role to the Senior Psychologist Education (SPE) role. The key difference between the two is the removal of the 0.5 FTE direct service component, to free up time for supervision and for more strategic work<sup>8</sup>. The three areas of work that are articulated in the SPE position description include:

- clinical supervision of school counselling staff
- strategic work across schools on local issues
- support for the school counselling service on complex cases (working with Networked Specialist Centres)

In this chapter we discuss the intended role of the SPE and how it is carried out in practice. We also discuss the perceived impacts of the changes to the role from the perspective of principals, SPEs<sup>9</sup>, LPPs and school counsellors who experienced the change.

## What is the role of the SPE?

### **On paper the SPE role has no direct service, but in practice this has been a significant component of many SPEs' work due to resourcing gaps**

When we interviewed SPEs in Term 4 2017 many were carrying out a large direct service load (one estimated it to be 75% of their time) due to vacancies or leave. SPEs typically felt compelled to do this direct service work which was having a significant impact on their workload and was limiting their time available for other work. We heard that SPEs were working extremely hard to fulfil the requirements of their role, including working extended hours.

"I've got SPEs who come in at 7:30 in the morning to do their supervision with their provisional psychs because that's the only time that they can do it because the rest of their workload is so big. That's just reality. And/or they're taking lots of work home like reports so that they can go through them."  
[LPP]

When we interviewed LPPs in Term 3 2018, many commented that the duties their SPEs were performing vary from patch to patch, dependent on the vacancies within their team, the individual SPEs personal preference as to whether they provide direct service to schools, and their supervision load. The majority said that the SPEs in their teams were still providing direct service, typically between 0.2 and 0.6 FTE. Other LPPs noted that some SPEs had chosen not to provide direct service but are on-call to the schools in their patch in the event of a crisis.

There has been no change to the number of staff that a SPE supervises. However, some SPEs experienced an increase in supervision load, because school counselling staff have specific supervision requirements for their registration. In addition, SPEs who had new team members needed to spend more time than before helping staff become familiar with departmental processes and building new relationships. Further, SPEs have had to adjust to supporting staff employed under two different awards (such as finding an appropriate workplaces and work during the school holiday period), and sometimes managing new tensions between staff.

<sup>8</sup> A total of 56.5 FTE of the additional 236 counselling positions were recruited for the purpose of releasing DGOs/SPEs from their face to face direct service allocation.

<sup>9</sup> The views shared by SPEs are from Term 4 2017. We did not proceed with the interviews we had planned for late 2018 because SPEs had a large workload due to the announcement of the 2019-2021 SCS allocations. We interviewed other stakeholder groups in Term 4 2017/Term 1 2018 and in Term 3 2018.

“It’s been a lot of time spent trying to make inroads to this team and to slowly change the culture I guess, and support the new members that – or to support the team here...Just that dance that we’ve been going through to get us in a space that we’re really quite comfortable in working as a team together and them knowing what I’ll do to support them and what I actually do generally in my role.” [SPE]

### **SPEs have consistently prioritised clinical supervision and support of counselling staff**

Our interviews with SPEs indicated that the aspect of their role that they were consistently prioritising (in addition to essential face-to-face service) was clinical supervision and support of school counselling staff. Most SPEs felt they were able to do this effectively.

“Yeah, so I’m very busy, but it’s just so nice to be able to spend time, particularly with my young trainee counsellors, but the others as well. I think that has been a huge benefit to SPE. The additional time to spend with counsellors in areas such as this where they need it. So yes, I’m much more on hand to be able to give advice, to provide guidance, to go out and meet principals, meet with my school counsellors, go to learning support teams, really important jobs.” [SPE]

All SPEs also reported supporting complex case work, either through face-to-face service or through supervision of school counselling staff. Some were also working with Networked Specialist Centres (as illustrated below), but this was not consistent across SPEs. Some LPPs noted that time pressures result in SPEs pushing this aside and focusing on other duties instead.

“It’s good, in that we are having that inter-agency conversation around more challenging students ... And even from the perspective of knowing who the manager of FACS is and having the police presence there, and talking to them about certain issues. Because they bring up what are community matters. So to be aware of those on a monthly basis is actually quite good as well. And we have some Pathfinders houses, and we’re getting more complex presentations of students coming to the area through those facilities.” [SPE]

Not all SPEs were undertaking strategic work across schools on local issues due to time pressures. However, some good examples of this work were provided by SPEs, and overall we can start to see a picture of the value that the role can bring when teams are fully resourced.

“I’m in the process of organising regular case meetings between the health department and the family referral service and myself and the high school in one of my towns to talk about referral pathways and who’s working with which family so that we know that they’re all being supported so that the high school has an idea of who’s supporting what student so that we’re not overlapping, and so that when there’s changes in one of our organisations the others are actually aware of it because that’s an issue too.” [SPE]

## **What are the perceived impacts of the change?**

### **SPEs and LPPs believe the changes to the role will improve the school counselling service, but many had not yet experienced the changes in practice**

Amongst SPEs and LPPs there was overall support for changes to the SPE role and the rationale for the change. Some were starting to see the benefits of the role change on the support provided to school counsellors and, consequently, the service provided to schools. However, as explained in the previous section, most SPEs were not yet performing their role as intended, so impacts of changes were mostly discussed at a conceptual level.

“Honestly, when I had a caseload before, we didn’t have as regular a supervision, or the time allowance was not, I guess, as generous. So you could only, sort of, address what was popping up at the top of their concerns in their caseload, so – whereas now, it just allows for a more comprehensive discussion of cases across all of their different schools, and to review their file notes and to check over assessment results, and things, I think, are just done more thoroughly.” [SPE]

“It’s part of the role of the SPE to be involved in that strategic systems kind of work ... and there’s more interagency networking and projects going on in a lot of spaces, so that’s really good. That’s always going to have an impact on student wellbeing, and particularly perhaps for the kids who don’t actually access the service directly.” [SPE]

Regarding direct service most SPEs felt that the role should retain a small element in order to maintain skills, remain current and in-tune with what was happening in schools, and be able to provide good quality supervision.

### **SPEs have experienced significant pressure and stress as a result of the broader changes to the school counselling service, particularly during the early stages**

SPEs experienced a particularly challenging period when they were tasked with implementing the new school counselling allocations on-the-ground. This required implementing extensive changes to the composition of counselling teams and to the groupings of schools serviced by each team.

“It was quite difficult in 2016 in some ways, mainly I guess reallocating all the areas. While there was some kind of input from up the top, at the end of the day it came down to the SPEs to really sort out between ourselves what our patches looked like and communicate to the principals.” [SPE]

One SPE commented: “I lost every counsellor bar myself and one other. So that was a massive shift.” [SPE]

Then, as recruitment activity led to staffing changes requiring more recruitment activity, many SPEs experienced significant vacancies in their team. Many took on responsibility for backfilling these service gaps while attempting to fulfil their own role and supporting and upskilling new team members with varying levels of experience. At the same time, many were fielding complaints from principals who did not have their allocations filled for an extended period of time. SPEs working in rural and remote areas experienced the greatest challenges.

“When there’s no one else to do it [face-to-face], it’s kind of the buck stops here really, and I have found that really hard. Some people have developed a practice of going to our director if they’re not happy with something.” [SPE]

### **However, SPEs have felt well-supported by the new LPP role and have welcomed having ready-access to training and resources**

In 2017 the department created a new Leader Psychology Practice (LPP) role to drive improvement of the school counselling service and to provide support and clinical supervision to SPEs; ten were recruited in Term 2 2017. SPEs viewed the new LPP role very positively and they highly valued the clinical supervision and problem solving support that their LPP was providing.

“So I definitely find the new leader psychology practice position very supportive, you know, personally and professionally in dealing with those changes and getting support.” [SPE]

SPEs also commended the department’s investment in professional development available to SPEs. During interviews, SPEs identified several specific types of training that they would like to be able to access, but these were not raised as a criticism of what was on offer, but rather training that was of specific interest to them. Taking the time to do the training has been quite challenging for SPEs, particularly those still delivering direct service and needing to be relieved from schools.

Most SPEs found that resources and assessment tools were readily available in their teams, but a minority reported access difficulties due to a need for multiple sets or due to funding constraints. Another SPE raised the need for better IT support for electronic assessments as this would be a more efficient way of working.

“Part of the issue is that because we’re quite a long district... mostly I have to buy four lots of resources... because the only way that things can be moved around really is if I’m moving around the district and physically can take them from place to place.” [SPE]

### **Despite SPEs experiencing increased time pressure, school counselling service staff generally report feeling well supported by SPEs**

Despite the time pressures that SPEs were experiencing from performing direct service and/or increased supervision hours, all of the school psychologist and school counsellor interviewees reported feeling well supported by their SPE. Many commented that they receive, on average, one hour of face-to-face supervision once or twice a term, unless being supervised for registration (in which case they received additional supervision). In addition, they receive weekly or fortnightly phone calls or emails from their SPE as a check-in. Some school counselling service staff also mentioned attending fortnightly team meetings with all of the school psychologists and school counsellors within their patch.

“I speak to her at least once a week by phone. Probably more like two or three times a week via phone, often via email, but face-to-face supervision - well, we do projects together a lot, but in terms of actual supervision, at least twice a term. But lots of incidental stuff along the way. Very, very supportive, and I would not be able to do this job without her.” [School counsellor]

One area of concern was that, with the strict supervision requirements for school counselling service staff completing their registration, SPEs would not have the ability to provide supervision to all who require it.

“So at the moment, there is a waitlist to get the supervision to be a psychologist for many school counsellor teams. . . people [school psychologists] are coming out [of university] and there's a contractual agreement that they get an AHPRA supervisor, then I'm concerned about the leapfrogging over queues...” [School counsellor]

### **The principals we interviewed did not have a good understanding of the changes to the SPE role and had not noticed any impacts of these changes**

Amongst the principals that we interviewed there was some understanding that direct service had been removed from the role and a more limited understanding of the rationale for the change. One perception was that the removal of direct service rendered it to an administrative and hence, less effective role. Due to the limited level of awareness of the changes to the nature of the role, principals were not in a position to provide much feedback regarding perceived impacts of the changes.

Nevertheless, most principals found the SPE role to be valuable and felt that they and/or their school counselling service staff were well supported by their SPE. Some also recognised that their SPE was hampered in their role by team vacancies. One secondary school principal commented: “The advice and support that the senior person has given to my counsellors therefore impacts positively on my kids, which is important.”

“It won't work until we've got a really stable case load at this level; so the school psych, school counsellors, until they're actually really sorted out and we've got no gaps, then they [SPEs] won't be able to work in that support role as effective as they should because they've got to go and fill in the gaps.” [Primary school principal]

### **A separate concern for SPEs is that in the current system they are not involved in decisions to approve school psychologist and school counsellor leave**

Several SPEs and LPPs voiced a particular concern that base school principals are responsible for approving the leave of their school psychologists and school counsellors. In many cases, base school principals are approving leave without discussion with the SPE, who needs to remain aware of the movements of all of the school counselling service staff in their patch. If one staff member goes on leave, this can have an impact on the entire service within their patch. LPPs commented that this is particularly problematic in leave without pay circumstances where the leave tends to be of a longer duration and base school principals expect that their service will be covered by another school counselling service staff member.

“I think that there's not a good communication system between base school principals and their understanding of approving leave. So quite often the senior psychologist education has no idea that leave has been approved. And you know, we can't backfill. We don't have casuals. So principals make that decision and then wonder why the part-time leave without pay could potentially impact their school and the service that they receive. But it impacts all of the schools that the person services. So there is an issue of principal's approving leave without any discussion with anyone in school counselling. And looking at the district and how it's going to be impacted.” [LPP]

## 8. What is the perceived impact of the scholarship funding on the school counselling staff recruitment strategy?

Under SSSS the department invested \$8 million to fund up to 500 scholarships and sponsorships. In this chapter we examine the perceived impact of the funding invested, drawing on available department data and the perspectives of school counselling service staff and principals.

There are three types of scholarships and sponsorships:

1. SSSS Graduate Scholarship Program – this program provided metropolitan and rural scholarships in the Master of Teaching (School Counselling) at the University of Sydney, or in the Master of Professional Psychology at an approved university or institution<sup>10</sup>. In 2019 this changed to providing scholarships to a new tailored Master of Professional Psychology (School Psychology) that the department developed in partnership with the University of Wollongong<sup>11</sup>. On completion, recipients receive a permanent position in the school counselling service in a location of workforce need.
2. School Counsellor Sponsorship Program – this existing program supports teachers to retrain as school counsellors and was expanded under SSSS. Teachers who have a major in psychology complete a graduate certificate in psychology at the University of Wollongong that is equivalent to the 4th year of a psychology degree<sup>12</sup>. There are metropolitan and rural sponsorships available. On completion, recipients receive a permanent school counsellor position in an area of workforce need.
3. SSSS Workforce Development Scholarships – scholarships are available for a range of professional development courses for staff to extend their skills.

### The scholarship program has led to many permanent appointments to the school counselling service so far, but the full benefits will take time to realise

The scholarship data provided by Learning and Wellbeing details that the department has awarded 47 Master of Teaching Scholarships and 49 Master of Professional Psychology Scholarships over the 2016 to 2019 SSSS funding period, a total of 96 graduate scholarships (refer to Table 2).

The number of graduate scholarships includes 16 scholarships that the department awarded in 2019 for the new tailored Master of Professional Psychology (School Psychology) that the department developed in partnership with the University of Wollongong. We note that the number of applicants for this scholarship was much higher, but the number of recipients is capped at 25 as part of the agreement with University of Wollongong. In 2019, the department did not offer any scholarships for the existing Master of Professional Psychology course.

So far 40 scholarship recipients have been appointed to permanent positions with the school counselling service. This includes the majority of the 2016 and 2017 scholarship recipients and two of the 2018 recipients. Appointments cover all operational directorates, including three appointments in Rural North and four in Rural South and West which are the most difficult to fill.

<sup>10</sup> Master of Professional Psychology scholarship recipients undertake a one year full-time internship (temporary employment) prior to ongoing employment.

<sup>11</sup> DoE awarded the contract to the University of Wollongong, following a tender process. Under the contract DoE funds University of Wollongong for 25 places.

<sup>12</sup> Teachers complete the graduate certificate program over two years. Teachers who do not have major in psychology can receive sponsorship to first complete a major in psychology.



**Table 2:**

Learning and Wellbeing scholarship recipient statistics

Scholarships	2016	2017	2018	2019**	Total
<b>Master of Teaching</b>					
Number of applications received	16	17	17	27	77
Number of rural scholarships awarded	3	3	4	4	14
Permanent rural appointments*	3	3	1	–	7
Number of metropolitan scholarships awarded	8	7	11	7	33
Permanent metropolitan appointments*	8	7	1	–	16
<b>Master of Professional Psychology</b>					
Number of applications received	21	21	20	68	130
Number of rural scholarships awarded	10	4	8	6	28
Permanent rural appointments*	8	1	–	–	9
Number of metropolitan scholarships awarded	3	5	3	10	21
Permanent metropolitan appointments*	3	5	–	–	8

**Note:** \*shown against the year the scholarship was awarded

\*\* In 2019 the Master of Professional Psychology statistics refer to the new Master of Professional Psychology (School Psychology) at the University of Wollongong

These statistics suggest that the initiative is having a positive impact on the school counselling service recruitment strategy. However, we do not know from these statistics whether or not the scholarship recipients would have still undertaken studies and been recruited to the school counselling service without this funding. LPPs that we interviewed believed the scholarships were a successful initiative and some identified having filled difficult to fill positions as a result of the scholarship initiative.

“We’ve got some school counsellors, who finished their training and will be placed into a substantive position. So that does fill two areas that were difficult to staff.” [LPP]

It will take some time before the benefits of this scholarship initiative are fully realised. The timeframe to complete a Masters Scholarship Program is a minimum of two years full-time or three years part-time, but can extend further. LPPs and SPEs also point out that there is considerable additional supervisory work involved. Further, some LPPs mentioned that retaining staff that come into the school counselling service through the scholarship pathway can be a challenge in regional and remote areas once the deed of agreement has ended.

“They get new people every two or three years and then they leave when their deed of agreement has gone. So that’s a bit of an issue for some of our areas because they do feel like they’re always getting a new person, they do their contract and then they’re gone.” [LPP]

A handful of interviewees across various stakeholder groups raised a concern that the scholarships (and sponsorships) may potentially attract people to the school counselling service because of the guarantee of a permanent position, rather than a strong desire to do the role.

### **The scholarship program could be strengthened by ensuring information regarding geographic boundaries and transfer processes is clearly communicated and understood**

Two of the school psychologists we interviewed entered the department through the Masters of Professional Psychology scholarship program. Both had not fully understood their appointment conditions before they accepted the scholarship and neither were satisfied with their appointment arrangements.

Both school psychologists also commented that they were unaware of the boundary lines of the areas they had to nominate to work in once they completed their degree. One had chosen an area close to where she lived but the school to which she was allocated was a substantial distance away. The other had relocated her family to be near the regional school to which she was allocated on the understanding that she would be able to service the school for an extended period. Again, she was unaware of the size of the area and was reassigned to another school a substantial distance away.

"My understanding was it was like "Would you move to [regional area]?" I said, "How long can I stay if I like it?" They said, "As long as you like." But then that changed later on. So, my understanding was like we moved and we were buying a house and all the rest of it ... But then six months in, it was like "Where do you want to move to next? You can move to these locations?" I said "I'm not moving. I've just moved five hours for this job." [School psychologist]

## From 2016 to 2019 the sponsorship program supported 194 teachers to retrain as school counsellors, and 94 of these were funded through SSSS

The School Counsellor Sponsorship Program supports teachers to retrain as school counsellors and HR funds 25 sponsorships per year. From 2017 to 2019 SSSS funding was used to top up the number of sponsorships that could be offered. Data provided by HR details that this funding enabled an additional 94 sponsorships to be awarded in these years (refer to Table 3). Together with the HR funding this meant that the department awarded a total of 194 sponsorships during the 2016 to 2019 SSSS funding period.

These statistics suggest that this initiative is positively impacting the school counselling service recruitment strategy, although it is possible that some recipients would have undertaken studies without this funding.

**Table 3:**

Learning and Wellbeing  
sponsorship recipient  
statistics

School Counsellor Sponsorships	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total (2016-2019)
<b>Total number of scholarships awarded</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>194</b>
Sponsorships awarded with existing HR funding	(25)	(25)	(25)	(25)	(75)
Sponsorships awarded with additional SSSS funding	(NA)	(17)	(31)	(48)	(94)

Several principals and SPEs that we interviewed argued that the lack of post-study financial incentives created a barrier to attracting more teachers to the sponsorship program, even though the sponsorship allowances were generous. Some principals speculated that teaching staff would not be interested in retraining as counsellors unless they had experience managing student wellbeing issues, for example as a year advisor. None knew of teachers that had recently applied for or received a sponsorship.

"But you know, for them, very few teachers are going to do all that and still be paid the same way as a teacher ... I can understand why we can't recruit enough school counsellors if that's the case." [SPE]

One LPP highlighted a challenge associated with sponsorships in rural areas in that there are limited positions after re-training, which can lead to unmanageable additional travel:

"they're not guaranteed a placement which in a rural area is very significant because if there's only one job for a hundred kilometres or something and someone else comes in and gets it while you are a school counsellor in training, it could potentially not come up for 15 years. That means you are travelling a couple of hundred kilometres every day and then on top of that, further within the district that you are travelling to which is even more driving. So, people just don't sign on." [LPP]

## The workforce development scholarships are highly valued and 372 of these have been awarded as at July 2019

LPPs spoke very positively about the workforce development scholarships and the useful professional learning they provided. They also mentioned that those who received these scholarships had often returned and shared information with other staff. One LPP pointed out that the workforce development scholarships were particularly useful for upskilling new school psychologists in certain domains.

“Some of the workforce development scholarships ... they ran a number last year specifically around the one on trauma informed practice, there was another I think on assessment for Indigenous students. They were very popular and people that went to them really enjoyed them. Some discussion and conversation has come back into the workforce because of them.” [LPP]

As of July 2019, 372 workforce development scholarships have been awarded.

## 9. Which changes to the school counselling service are working well, and which changes are not working well?

In this chapter we discuss three changes to the school counselling service that are working well and three that are not working well.

### Changes that are working well

#### **The department has provided a strong and highly visible commitment to expanding the school counselling service, and the school counselling service and State Office team have worked tirelessly to implement the expansion**

Many interviewees conveyed how uplifting and motivating it was to see the department make such a strong and highly visible commitment to supporting students' wellbeing and to expanding and strengthening the school counselling service. One LPP commented: "It's an exciting time for us. The quality psychological service that we're aiming for is, we're on the way."

"I can also talk about a very long history that I have had with the Department of Education, and how proud I am to be a part of this process. It's just been a great thing." [SPE]

It is very evident that staff in State Office, the initial implementation team, SPEs and LPPs, have worked extremely hard to implement the intended changes on the ground. SPEs in particular have effectively navigated a challenging period involving multiple changes at a system, team and role level and many have worked in under-resourced areas for long periods of time. At an individual school level, school counsellors and school psychologists have demonstrated an enduring commitment to supporting a growing number of students in need.

#### **The introduction of the school psychologist role has broadened the recruitment pool for the school counselling service and has brought in highly valued complementary skills and experience**

At the time of writing this report almost all of the 236 new positions have been filled (notwithstanding vacancies due to subsequent leave and part time arrangements) and this would not have been possible without broadening the recruitment pool. Initially the new positions were advertised only for school counsellors, but only 11 positions were filled from this recruitment activity and most of the successful candidates were existing members of the school counselling service. Subsequently the positions were re-advertised for both school counsellors and school psychologists. The majority of principals and SPEs that we spoke to were very satisfied with the service being provided by their school psychologist(s), and they reflected on the highly valuable complementary skills and experience they had brought to the school. For counsellors and school psychologists who have had the opportunity to work with another colleague, this has provided the opportunity for peer mentoring and collaboration.

#### **The new LPP role is an important support structure for SPEs and it also enhances the department's ability to plan strategically for the school counselling service**

The introduction of 10 new LPP positions has provided SPEs with highly valued support and clinical supervision and this is having positive flow on effects for school counsellors and school psychologists. Further, the LPPs are a highly qualified and experienced team that can work closely with the State Office team to plan for ongoing improvements to the school counselling service and to make strategic decisions that impact on service delivery, including recruitment strategies for difficult-to-fill positions. The team is highly collaborative and is an effective communication channel between State Office and the broader school counselling service.

“There’s stuff that can be given to the LPPs to be able to work with and then feedback to State Office, rather than everything being generated from State Office . . . we’re really working on consistency, we’ve got lots and lots of communication.” [LPP]

“People are understanding what the leader psychology practice role is. I’m having more communication with directors. So that’s really good. I’m liaising and consulting with more state office units. And we’re getting some momentum on some rural and remote strategies that were just ideas before - and I never thought would take off.” [LPP]

## Changes that are not working well

### **The initial timelines that were communicated in a letter to principals regarding the filling of allocations were unachievable**

The letter to principals advising them of their new core school counselling allocation communicated a timeline that was too ambitious and not achievable given the scale of the recruitment task and the interlinked changes to be implemented. During consultations with principal groups the advice was there would be a transition to implementation across three years, but the letter did not clearly convey this idea. This had the unintended effect of setting unrealistic expectations. There was also a misunderstanding among some principals regarding the role that they would have in the recruitment process.

### **The orientation and support for school psychologists is improving over time but could still be enhanced**

The support available to school psychologists is improving over time and the department has continually refined and enhanced the induction process for new school psychologists. SPEs are also now much better positioned to support the new psychologists in their teams because there are fewer resourcing gaps and because they have learnt how their support needs differ from those of school counsellors.

Nevertheless, the orientation and support for school psychologists could still be enhanced. All of the school psychologists that we interviewed commented that, while the induction provided a valuable overview of the school psychologist role, it did not provide them with the necessary knowledge regarding departmental processes vital to their role. All school psychologists therefore recommended that the department hold multiple induction sessions which could include an induction before they commenced service as well as ongoing induction sessions spanning across the first year.

“We had a three-day orientation in Sydney and that was a bit of a crash course. That was a good help but then maybe doing that again, I don’t know, four months in or more periodically. And then going through things more in depth once we actually understood.” [School psychologist]

Other suggestions were for training in learning difficulties and teaching strategies. Some of the LPPs and school counsellors that we interviewed identified shadowing as a particularly helpful induction activity for new school psychologists.

“In an ideal world, we’d have enough people to shadow other counsellors before they start in their own schools. Just like our school counsellors have pracs, I think school psychologists need a prac with a counselling staff member.” [School counsellor]

“I suggest we provide probationary training spanning a term or longer for new recruits that have never worked in schools before. SCITS (school counsellors in training) receive a year of retraining and many have already been teachers.” [LPP]

“...more about specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, and reading difficulties, or difficulties with maths...And perhaps even more training for myself in what classroom modifications can be made... often teachers want to know – well, okay, if that student has a working memory difficulty, then what modifications can we put in place?” [School psychologist]

Another strategy to consider is providing information and advice to principals regarding effective in-school induction procedures for new school psychologists, and ensuring that the principal is aware that the school psychologist may not have worked in a school before.

“I think [school psychologist] would be in a much better place in relation to some of the teachers here if we’d all had a much better understanding of what the difference with a psychologist and a counsellor is, and if she had had a proper induction into the Department of Education, and that I had known that we would have to induct her into the school.” [Principal]

“So I think really letting the new psych know, “This is what the principal deals with. This is what your SPE deals with. These are the kind of communications that should be going on, that the school need to know about, and these are the kind of things that your co-counsellor that you share a school with also needs to be aware of.” [School psychologist]

Finally we heard that some school psychologists left the school counselling service because their early experiences were not positive (HR statistics show that three school psychologists separated from the department in 2017 and nine did in 2018). While many school psychologists were warmly welcomed to their role, we heard accounts of some school psychologists receiving very negative messages. The information we have gathered for this evaluation suggests that attitudes are now more consistently positive towards school psychologists, but it is important to continue to promote attitudes of mutual respect.

### **Some principals and members of the school counselling service viewed the consultation process as too narrow, in particular regarding the changes to the allocation methodology**

Developing the new core school counselling allocation methodology included establishing a representative Stakeholder Advisory Group, undertaking focus groups with more than 300 participants, and reviewing existing research and practices<sup>13</sup>.

Nevertheless, we heard several principals and members of the school counselling service express the view that broader consultation was needed regarding the changes to the school counselling service. One particular example of this was the allocation methodology, which some school counselling service staff felt was developed without adequate input from members of the school counselling service with on-the-ground experience.

The following views were shared by LPPs and SPEs:

- a common viewpoint was that a state-based formula is not able to take into consideration all elements of school need and complexity. Local knowledge is required to identify and address any peculiarities, and so the model needs to allow for flexibility at the local level. Some specific school contexts were highlighted including early intervention settings, schools with highly fluctuating enrolments within a year or over the three year period, and schools that experienced a specific highly traumatic event
- several SPEs, LPPs and principals felt that large schools and/or those with large support units are underserved by the core school counselling allocation methodology because the allocation is capped at 1FTE. Some also reported that schools for specific purposes are underserved
- some SPEs made the point that principals may need further encouragement to use their Flexible Funding for Wellbeing Services to enhance their school counselling service, as well as guidance on how to do this given the shortage of school counselling service staff.

These viewpoints are likely to apply to the 2019-2021 methodology which followed the same approach. The key change put in place was an increase in allocation for schools that had experienced an unusual growth in student enrolments. We interviewed a couple of LPPs after they had learned about the 2019-2021 allocations and they remained concerned about the approach.

Finally several principals raised a concern about being serviced by two members of the school counselling service whereas their strong preference was to have consistent service from one individual.

<sup>13</sup> The Stakeholder Advisory Group comprised representatives from the NSW Secondary Principals Council, Primary Principals Association, NSW Teachers Federation, Public Service Association of NSW, the NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens Association, Australian Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools and relevant Departmental areas including Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, Local Schools Local Decisions, People and Services, Connected Communities and Learning and Engagement

# 10. Key findings and future implications

## Summary of key findings

### **How are school counselling services being used by schools and students?**

Students who access the school counselling service typically require intervention, assessment, and/or referral to external services. Interviewees consistently spoke of mental health concerns becoming more prevalent in schools and identified anxiety as the most common reason that students present to the school counselling service. The school counselling service spends considerable time managing crises and referring students who require long term support to external services. It appears that only a minority of schools are benefiting from early intervention work due to time constraints.

### **How have schools implemented the new resources for school counselling services?**

Many schools that we spoke to in 2017 and 2018 had not yet been able to fully access their new school counselling service resources. This was because the large-scale school counselling service recruitment task (undertaken concurrently with other major changes to the school counselling service) was still underway in 2018 and because many school counselling service staffing movements had ensued from the recruitment. This was a source of frustration for staff in these schools. At schools that have had an increase in school counsellor/psychologist time, we heard that more students are accessing the school counselling service or accessing a greater level of support. In some cases, preventative work is now taking place. School counsellors and school psychologists undertake the same duties, and schools are drawing on the different set of experiences each bring to the role. Despite the intended change to release SPEs from direct service, many SPE were continuing to provide direct service to schools due to staffing vacancies in their teams.

### **What are the perceived changes to student wellbeing that have occurred in schools as a result of the expansion to the school counselling service workforce?**

Many schools that we spoke to in 2017 and 2018 had not yet benefited from increased school counselling service time. In schools that had experienced an increase in counsellor/psychologist time, staff reported reduced waitlists and wait times, more students being supported, better management of crisis incidents, better follow-up and liaison with external services, and sometimes an increase in early intervention initiatives. Department data also shows that the annual number of new case files opened has increased from 28,001 in 2015 (pre SSSS) to 37,796 in 2018. However, the school counselling service has been stretched in areas where vacancies remain, and even with an expanded service there is unmet demand in many schools.

### **What are the perceived differences in the roles of the school counselling service staff with and without a teaching qualification?**

The large majority of principals, SPEs and LPPs that we consulted believe that school counselling service staff with and without a teaching qualification perform similar functions, and are equally effective in their roles, if they develop a good understanding of how schools work. School psychologists are valued for the complementary skills and experience that they bring to the school counselling service. The areas that some stakeholders identify for improvement relate to a lack of prior classroom and departmental experience – but many view this as temporary.

### **What is the role of the Senior Psychologist Education, and what are the perceived impacts of the changes to the role?**

On paper the SPE role has no direct service, but in practice this has been a significant component of work for many, due to staffing vacancies. Even so, while typically under considerable time pressure, SPEs have consistently prioritised clinical supervision and support of counselling staff, and school counselling

service staff report feeling well supported by their SPE. Over time SPEs and LPPs believe the changes to the role will improve the school counselling service, but many SPEs were yet to experience the full changes in practice, due to their need to continue providing direct service. SPEs have navigated a stressful period of unprecedented growth in the service, while implementing the many concurrent on-the-ground service changes and supporting several new school counselling service staff in their teams. However, they have felt well-supported by the new LPP role and have welcomed having ready access to training and resources.

### **What is the perceived impact of the scholarship funding on the school counselling recruitment strategy?**

The scholarship program has so far led to 40 permanent appointments to the school counselling service, and the new tailored Master of Professional Psychology (School Psychology) program introduced in 2019 has been particularly successful in attracting applicants. The full benefits of this initiative will be realised in years to come as they are new staff and require additional support from SPEs in their early years. One way to strengthen the program is to ensure information regarding geographic boundaries and transfer processes is clearly communicated and understood.

From 2016 to 2019 the sponsorship program supported 194 teachers to retrain as school counsellors, with 94 of these funded by SSSS. Some stakeholders pointed to the lack of post-study financial incentives as a barrier to more applicants. The workforce development scholarships are highly valued and 372 of these had been awarded as at July 2019.

### **Which changes to the school counselling service are working well, and which changes are not working well?**

We identified three changes working well and three not working well. Changes working well include: the department's strong and highly visible commitment to expanding the school counselling service, along with the tireless efforts of the school counselling service (in particular SPEs) and State Office team to implement the expansion; the introduction of the school psychologist role that has broadened the recruitment pool for the school counselling service and brought in valued complementary skills and experience; and the introduction of the new LPP role which supports SPEs in their role and enhances the department's ability to plan strategically for the school counselling service.

The changes that have not worked well include: the initial letter to principals that communicated ambitious timelines regarding the filling of allocations within schools; the consultation process that some principals and members of the school counselling service perceived as too narrow, in particular regarding the changes to the allocation methodology; and some aspects of the orientation and support for school psychologists that could be enhanced.

## **Future implications**

The changes implemented under SSSS are the most significant that the school counselling service has ever seen, and the benefits for students, schools and the school counselling service will likely be long lasting. The department has funded 236 new school counselling service positions, an expansion of the school counselling service by 30%. To implement this expansion, many other changes had to take place. To increase the supply of school counselling service staff, the department introduced the new school psychologist role and expanded the graduate scholarship and sponsorship opportunities. To distribute the new positions fairly across the state, the department developed a new state-based allocation methodology. The expansion and new allocation meant that school counselling service teams and boundaries needed to be reconfigured. To better support school counsellors and school psychologists in their roles, the department transitioned the DGO role into a new SPE role with an increased focus on providing support to school counsellors and psychologists, and on undertaking strategic work. Finally the department introduced a new LPP role to better support SPEs and to drive improvements across the school counselling service.

It is important to recognise that implementing change at this scale has been challenging and often stressful for school counselling service staff. It has also been a difficult period for many school communities that have waited a long time for their allocation to be filled, or that have experienced ongoing service gaps arising from staffing movements.



We have interviewed 63 principals, teachers and members of the school counselling service about the expansion and its perceived impacts. Stakeholders unanimously and vigorously supported the need for this expansion and several articulated the positive changes that have started to occur. Interviewees in schools that had experienced an increase in counsellor/psychologist time reported reduced waitlists and wait times, more students being supported, better management of crisis incidents, better follow-up and liaison with external services, and sometimes an increase in early intervention initiatives. The reported increase in capacity is also supported by department data showing a sharp rise in the number of new counselling files opened since the expansion. In counselling teams that have few resourcing gaps, school counselling service staff report that SPEs are providing better supervision and support to their team. SPEs also report that the introduction of the LPP role has been of great benefit to them with improved supervision and support taking place. This role also strengthens the department's ability to make strategic improvements to the school counselling service.

However, at the time of interviews many schools were yet to experience their increase in school counselling service time. At the end of 2019, Learning and Wellbeing confirmed that all 236 positions have now been filled (although some of the occupants may be on leave or relieving elsewhere, creating flow-on vacancies). It will take time before positive changes arising from the expansion are consistent across areas and schools. This is because: recruitment timeframes have varied across areas; there has been extensive flow-on recruitment activity arising from staffing movements; and there are workforce challenges with many staff nearing retirement age or just starting families. Meanwhile, the number of students presenting with wellbeing and other counselling support needs at schools is rising, often beyond even the expanded capacity of the school counselling service. We spoke with many schools that had gained more school counsellor/psychologist time that still felt in need of much more support.

We have not measured the prevalence of perceived impacts through the surveys that we had planned (with principals, school counsellors, school psychologists), because more changes to the school counselling service and staffing movements took place before we commenced this work. Further, we have not undertaken outcome analyses drawing on the department's whole-school measures of student wellbeing (from the *TTFM* student survey) as this data would represent all students, not those in need of school counselling service support. We suspect, however, that it would be too soon to detect changes at a system-level for the reasons outlined above.

Therefore, the addition of a subsequent 55 positions to the school counselling service in early 2019, and the 2019 election commitment of another (up to) 100 school counselling service positions to better support secondary schools, are very positive developments for schools. However, some concerns will likely remain that challenges outlined in this report may apply to future expansion efforts. The feedback we have gathered from schools and the school counselling service in this evaluation will be useful to inform the remaining planning activities. In particular:

- principals and school counselling service staff seek clear communication regarding implementation timeframes and any necessary transitional arrangements, and further opportunity to identify and discuss on-the-ground implications
- senior school counselling service staff highlight the need to allow for flexibility at the local level when implementing allocations, in order to address unusual or unexpected elements of school complexity (for example, schools with highly fluctuating enrolments, specific traumatic events)
- principals seek consistency over time wherever feasible, and expressed a preference to be supported by a single school counselling service staff member.

The school psychologist role is a valuable addition to the school counselling service workforce that complements the skills and experience of school counsellors. Its introduction has also greatly facilitated the recruitment of 236 new positions. This is evident from the department's initial recruitment round for school counsellors in which 11 appointments were made, many of whom were existing school counselling service members. The department has developed a good induction procedure following refinements over time, but more can be done to support school psychologists in their transition to a school environment. Options include providing ongoing induction and orientation sessions across their first year, developing more written guidance to navigate departmental processes, providing shadowing opportunities, and providing advice to principals regarding effective school-based induction procedures.

Finally, the scholarship and sponsorship initiatives are successfully leading to numerous permanent appointments per year, and these would be further strengthened by ensuring information regarding geographic boundaries and transfer or merit selection processes is clearly communicated.

# Appendix A: Summary of interview questions

We asked all interviewees to provide their perspectives on how the expansion of the school counselling service has been implemented, the elements that are and are not working well, and the perceived impact that the expansion of the school counselling service has had on student wellbeing in NSW schools. Below is some information on the specific questions that each interviewee received relevant to their position.

## LPP interviews

LPPs were asked questions relating to their role and the extent to which they have been able to perform the key aspects of their role as they are intended on paper. Similar questions were asked regarding the role of the SPEs that they supervise in addition to the training opportunities that their SPEs have accessed and/or are wanting to access. Further, we explored the extent to which the school counselling service allocations are filled within each LPPs respective area and the ongoing challenges that may exist for the recruitment and retention of staff. LPPs were also asked for any feedback they have received from their SPEs regarding the extent to which the school psychologists within their area have transitioned to their role and suggestions for how this could be improved. Finally, we asked LPPs about the uptake of the SSSS scholarships and sponsorships within their respective areas.

## Principal interviews

Principals were asked to provide demographic information about their school including the wellbeing needs of their students. Further, we explored the extent to which the school counselling service allocation was filled within their school and their perspectives as to whether the allocation was meeting student demand. Principals were also asked about their perspectives regarding the introduction of the school psychologist role and the way the department assists school psychologists to transition to their role. We also questioned principals regarding their knowledge of the changes to the role of their SPE and the extent to which the change has impacted on their school. Finally, principals were asked questions regarding their knowledge of the SSSS scholarships and sponsorships and whether any of their staff had expressed interest in those.

## School counsellor/psychologist interviews

School counsellors and school psychologists were asked to provide demographic information about their base school including the wellbeing needs of the students. Further, we explored their perspectives as to how the expansion to the school counselling service has impacted on the services that they are able to provide and the extent to which they were personally impacted by staffing changes. School psychologists were asked questions regarding their experiences of transitioning to their role while school counsellors were asked their perspectives of, and experiences with, the new school psychologist role. School counsellors and school psychologists were also asked questions relating to their knowledge of the changes to the role of the SPE and the extent to which they perceived their SPE to be performing their role as intended on paper. Finally, we asked school counsellors and school psychologists about their professional development opportunities, access to resources and knowledge of and interest in the SSSS scholarships and sponsorships.



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