

Process evaluation of the expansion to the school counselling service

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

Evaluation background

In 2015, the NSW Department of Education introduced the Supported Students, Successful Students (SSSS) funding package. The expansion to the school counselling service is one of its key initiatives and includes \$80.7 million to employ an extra 236 full-time equivalent school counselling staff and \$8.0 million to expand the graduate scholarship program and workforce development scholarships. To implement the expansion, many concurrent changes took place, including reconfiguring teams and boundaries and the introduction of new roles.

The changes implemented under the SSSS funding package are the most significant that the school counselling service has ever seen. The 236 new positions reflect an expansion to the service by 30%.

CESE's process evaluation investigated different aspects of implementation and the perceived impacts on student wellbeing from 2016 to 2019. The methodology included:

- interviews with 63 school-based staff and members of the school counselling service from Term 4 2017 to Term 2 2019
- analysis of data on recruitment and separations, scholarships and sponsorships, and the number of new case files.

Main findings

Implementation has been a significant undertaking, and challenging in the interim for school counselling service staff and schools. Recruitment has been difficult in some areas and there has been extensive flow-on recruitment activity arising from staffing movements. As a result, many of the schools CESE spoke to in 2017 and 2018 had not yet experienced their expected increase in school counselling service time, and this was a source of frustration.

In schools that had experienced an increase in school counselling staff time, interviewees 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.

One significant change was the introduction of the new school psychologist role to facilitate recruitment of 236 new positions. Interviewees indicated that school counselling service staff and school principals value the complementary skills and experience school psychologists bring to the school counselling service.

Senior Psychologists Education (SPEs) have effectively navigated a time of unprecedented change, supporting several new school counselling service staff in their teams and managing staffing vacancies. The new role of Leader Psychology Practice has provided valuable support for SPEs and has enhanced the service's strategic planning capacity.

The scholarship funding from SSSS has successfully enabled 94 additional teachers to retrain as school counsellors under the existing sponsorship program, and 40 permanent appointments to be made from an additional scholarship program.

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).

The findings from this evaluation will be used to inform ongoing policy development and implementation for the school counselling service.