Review of the Student Support Officer Initiative

Final Report for
NSW Department of
Education and Communities

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SPRC
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Abbreviations

DEC	(NSW) Department of Education and Communities
HREC	(UNSW) Human Research Ethics Committee
LST	Learning and Support Team
NSW	New South Wales
SIA	(DEC) Social Inclusion Advisor
SPRC	Social Policy Research Centre
SSO	Student Support Officer
SWT	Student Wellbeing Team
UNSW	University of New South Wales

Executive Summary

Purpose

As part of the *Supporting Students Plan*, the NSW Government committed to trial fifty new Student Support Officer (SSO) positions in government secondary schools.

The NSW Department of Education and Communities commissioned the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) to undertake an independent review of the initiative. The Review examined the implementation of the program across the fifty schools, what had worked well, what had hindered effectiveness, and how to improve the program in the future.

Methods

The Review took a mixed methodology approach. The researchers designed and ran surveys with Principals, SSOs and students across all schools involved in the initiative; SSOs submitted de-identified records of their activities; data was gathered from workshops, and interviews with staff, students and stakeholders in five focus schools.

Profile of SSOs

SSOs were predominantly female. Some SSOs are highly trained and very experienced professionals while others are young people with little experience and few qualifications.

What went well

Almost four-fifths underwent induction within their first two months in the role and they were almost all satisfied with the induction.

SSOs also appear to be well integrated into the Student Wellbeing Teams (or equivalent), and are generally working very well with their colleagues. Forty out of 43 SSOs felt supported and valued by the team and the staff as a whole.

Principals recognised that while the SSO initiative initially focused on tackling bullying behaviours through targeted activities, 'practice and experience' had transformed the role into one providing holistic support for students.

Some students looked to the SSO as a stable point of contact during the transition process.

SSOs provide support and referrals for individual students. School staff members appreciated the skills that SSOs brought to the task of supporting increasingly complex needs of young people and families, by referring to external agencies and also contributing to support within the school context.

What had hindered effectiveness

Supervision emerged as a key area of concern. All SSOs required supervision from a member of teaching staff to learn school and Departmental protocol. While not acting as counsellors, many SSOs felt that their work brought them face to face with complex human issues for which they required appropriate support. SSOs therefore strongly felt the need for professional supervision of the type provided to social workers.

Most SSOs assessed their administrative supervision positively however many complained of the lack of professional supervision. Some SSOs had no supervision at all.

In the absence of satisfactory supervision, many SSOs spoke of the importance of support from other SSOs and from the Social Inclusion Advisor based at State Office.

There were indications that some teaching staff did not fully understand the value of the role.

Connected Communities

One aspect of the Review focused on whether the SSO role had unfolded differently in Connected Communities compared to other school communities. There were no indications that the SSO program had been affected by the Connected Communities program.

Conclusion

The Review has found that there is overwhelming support for the SSO initiative from principals, school staff, SSOs, students and external organisations. SSOs make an important contribution to the wellbeing of students. SSOs complement the existing range of provision in the schools, helping the wellbeing team to perform their roles more effectively, and linking the school with agencies and communities.

It appears that the SSOs have had an impact on the school far beyond the individual children with whom they have had contact. There are strong indications that through organising programs and involving external agencies in the schools, SSOs have facilitated improvements in the wellbeing of students in a number of areas.

The most significant area of contention for SSOs related to professional supervision, with many SSOs feeling strongly that this should be available to them. This raises significant questions about the role of SSOs. There is therefore a tension between allowing schools to adapt the SSO role to the individual school context and ensuring equitable treatment of staff and consistent parameters for the SSO role across all schools.

Despite these tensions, it appears that schools are generally managing the SSO role well. However their long term training and support needs will need to be addressed at a policy level, and cannot only be resolved on a case by case basis.

Overall this Review concludes that the SSO role has provided significant benefits to schools. SSOs have a specific and important role to play in secondary schools in NSW, particularly those with high levels of disadvantage in the school population. By leveraging opportunities in the community to further increase the impact of their work within schools, SSOs have provided value over and above the specific activities in which they have been involved.

1 Introduction

This is the final report of a review of Student Support Officers in secondary schools in NSW. As part of the *Supporting Students Plan*, the NSW Government committed to trial fifty new Student Support Officer (SSO) positions in government secondary schools. The Plan recognised the need for greater support for secondary students and their families. The SSO initiative is funded by the NSW Department of Education and Communities ('the Department').

The Department commissioned the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) to undertake an independent review of the initiative. The Review examined the implementation of the program across the fifty schools, what had worked well in delivering SSO services, what had hindered the program in its effectiveness, and how to improve the program in the future. The Review also considered outcomes for students and the wider community.

1.1 Duties of Student Support Officers

According to the SSO role statement, the primary objective of the SSO initiative is to increase support for students, particularly through their challenging secondary years, and to enhance the resilience and safety of young people.

The aims of the SSO initiative is to provide support to secondary students, with a particular focus on reaching and engaging more vulnerable students in order to:

● strengthen and develop student resilience and wellbeing (e.g. work with individual and small groups to develop coping skills, positive relationships)
● connect young people and their families with staff and local community services, activities and supports
● counter bullying, harassment and discrimination, with an emphasis on social media (cyber bullying)
● enhance positive relationships for students with their peers, families, supports
● increase student involvement in the life of the school (having a say)
● liaise with partner primary schools and families to support effective transition into secondary schools
● assist in research and implementation of evidence-based student wellbeing and anti-bullying strategies

To achieve these aims, SSOs and their schools engage in and form effective partnerships with a range of stakeholders, including other student support services (school counsellor,

Learning and Support Team, etc.), students' families, and a wide range of local community services and supports.

1.2   Review scope and focus

The Review sought to determine the effectiveness of providing SSOs to selected schools across NSW.

The *program process* component of the Review assessed effectiveness and challenges in key areas, including:

● facilitators and barriers to implementation (internal within schools, external within particular communities)
● the various ways schools and their communities have used the SSO position
● differences in the way the roles have unfolded in Connected Communities as compared with other schools
● professional support and mentoring needs of the SSOs, how these needs have been addressed, and suggestions about additional ways to meet these needs
● strengths and weaknesses of the initiative as a whole, including governance, resourcing and collaboration with a range of agencies and stakeholders

The *program outcome* component of the Review assessed the contribution SSOs made in key areas, including:

● promoting positive school cultures, greater connectedness and wellbeing in the school community
● building resilience, self-efficacy, and confidence in students
● recognising, respecting and responding to the identity and diversity of learners across the school community
● strengthening social responsibility among students, for example in the prevention of bullying, and providing opportunities for students to have a voice in their school communities

2   Methodology

The Review took a mixed methodology approach. Survey responses by Principals, SSOs and over 1500 students were triangulated with analysis of SSO records and data from workshops and interviews with staff, students and stakeholders in five focus schools.

2.1   Focus schools

The researchers conducted a series of workshops and interviews in five focus schools. Schools were chosen in consultation with the Department to ensure a mix of metropolitan, rural and regional locations.

At each school, researchers carried out two student workshops and one staff workshop (or individual interviews with staff), including SSOs, Principals, Deputy Principals, Head Teachers (Wellbeing), Counsellors, Year Advisors and other support staff. Schools provided contact details of key external agencies for follow-up telephone interviews, except in one location where researchers met with stakeholders face to face.

Table 1: Fieldwork dates and key statistics

Focus School	Dates (2014)	Students Workshops	Staff Members	External Stakeholders
1	17–18 March	2	5	3
2	24 March	2	6	2
3	31 March – 1 April	2	7	2
4	3 April	2	4	0
5	9 April	2	6	2
Total		10	28	9

2.2   Surveys

The researchers designed and ran three surveys:

- Principals
- SSOs
- Students

These surveys were conducted across all schools involved in the initiative.

Table 2: Survey participation

Survey	Completed	Maximum	Participation Rate
Principals	35	50	70 %
SSOs	43	44	98 %
Schools	32	44	68 %

Note: Schools without an SSO were not requested to take part in the Student Survey.

Schools were requested to identify at least 50 volunteers from Years 7 to 11 for the student survey. The researchers decided to exclude Year 12 students so as not to disrupt their preparations for the Higher School Certificate. Researchers advised Principals on how to select students to maintain confidentiality and ensure a "representative" mix of students, not only those who had worked closely with the SSO. Examples included asking particular roll call classes to complete the survey, or selecting one class from each year group.

All except one SSO completed the SSO survey. [1] Out of 50 Principals, 35 responded. All of those who responded provided lengthy comments. Students in 32 out of a total of 44 schools which had an SSO at the time of the Review completed the Student Survey.

In total the Review surveyed 1564 students in the 32 schools, an average of 49 students per school. Schools managed to provide a relatively equal distribution of student responses across grades. More boys than girls completed the survey.

Among the 1564 students, 248 identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and 333 came from a non-English speaking background (NESB).

Table 3: Student survey participants by sex and year level

Year	Male	Female	Not stated	Total
7	189	115	1	305
8	164	153	1	318
9	151	143	4	298
10	177	138	1	316
11	178	133	3	314
Not stated	7	5	1	13
Total	866	687	11	1564

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[1] One SSO completed the survey from a hospital bed.

Throughout this report, student survey results are reported as averages of results calculated on a school-by-school basis. For example, the proportion of Year 7 students who 'know who the SSO is and what s/he does?' was calculated as follows. First, the proportion of Year 7 students who answered 'yes' was calculated for each school. Then, the average of these proportions was computed. The figure presented in this report therefore represents an average for the schools in the initiative. More detail on the analysis methodology is provided in appendix B.

Workshop participants in the focus schools confirmed that students overwhelmingly referred to their SSO by their first or last name. Many did not know what the title "Student Support Officer" meant and were confused by it. Consequently, the student survey was customised for each school using the name by which SSOs told us the students knew them.

2.3   SSO records

SSOs were invited to submit de-identified records of their activity. SSOs in 32 schools contributed data. All SSOs sent records for Term I 2014. A small number also sent records from 2013. Researchers limited their analysis to Term I 2014 records, and excluded data from four of the 32 schools due to inconsistent reporting methods.

2.4   Ethics approval and parent/guardian consent

The UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee approved all surveys and fieldwork. All students who participated in fieldwork and their parents or guardians gave written consent with the option to opt out of the research at any time. Parents and guardians of students who volunteered to take part in the student survey were provided with an opt-out form if they did not wish their child to take part.

3 Profile of Student Support Officers

This chapter provides information on the demographics, qualifications and experience of Student Support Officers (SSOs) based on survey data.

3.1 Demographics

Student Support Officers (SSOs) were predominantly female. Six schools had not filled the SSO position during the survey phase of the Review. Of the 44 remaining positions, 36 were filled by females (82 per cent) and 8 by males.

Figure 1: SSOs by gender
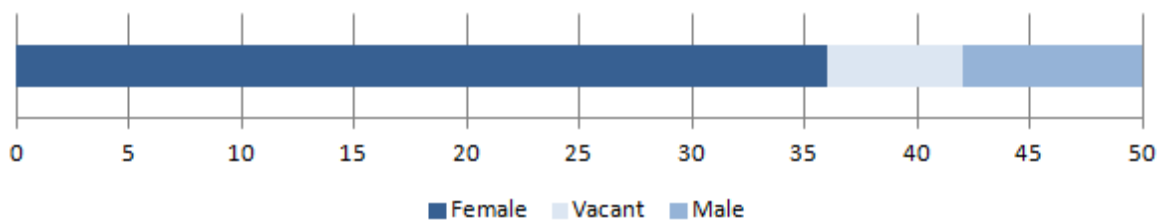
Source: SSO survey data

Two SSOs identified as Aboriginal. One spoke a language other than English at home.

SSOs formed two age cohorts. More than half were 24–32 years of age, including the modal age of 27 years. A further 13 SSOs fell within the 39–46 years age range. These two ranges accounted for 38 of the 44 SSOs.

3.2 Qualifications

All SSOs held a qualification, but the average highest level of education differed by age cohort. Four-fifths of those in the 24–32 years age range had completed a Bachelor or higher degree; common specialisations included psychology, social work and social science. Less than one-quarter of those in the 39–46 years cohort held a graduate qualification. Two SSOs, one in each age cohort, had completed postgraduate degrees.

Some SSOs with graduate degrees also mentioned additional qualifications relevant to their work. Examples included TAFE IV certificates on facilitating group work or mediation.

Table 4: Highest level of qualification by age range

Age range	TAFE	Bachelor	Higher	Total
24–32 years	5	19	1	25
39–46 years	9	3	1	13
Others	4	1		5
Total	18	23	2	43

Source: SSO survey data

3.3 Experience

Most SSOs brought substantial experience to the position. Those aged 35 or older had on average 10 years of relevant experience before taking on the role. Most had gained this experience in the community sector, working with young people and families; some also had worked in justice, disability and out-of-home care. Two SSOs in this age group had more than a decade of experience working as Department of Community Services case managers.

Seven of the 18 SSOs aged 35 or older had moved into the position from a different school-based support role, usually within the same school. Three of these had each spent ten years working as Student Learning and Support Officers or Teachers' Aides. Others had worked for shorter lengths of time as Teachers Aides, or other ancillary support staff.

The experience of SSOs in the 24–32 year age range varied according to their level of qualification. On average, SSOs in this age group brought an average of 3.5 years of relevant experience to the role. Those without graduate qualifications had, on average, seven years of experience working as youth, drug and alcohol or out-of-home care support workers. Some SSOs with degrees had also acquired substantial relevant work experience alongside their studies.

Some of the youngest SSOs had accepted the role straight out of university or transitioned into the role after successfully completing a social work or psychology practicum in the school. One SSO had taken on the position after qualifying as a school counsellor.

4 Implementing the role in schools

This chapter presents findings on the implementation of the Student Support Officer role in schools. It includes feedback collected through Principal and SSO surveys and fieldwork.

4.1 Role statement

The *Student Support Officer Role Statement* emerged as a common theme in fieldwork and in feedback from Principal and SSO surveys.

The Department distributed a role statement for the SSO position in early 2011. Some Principals noted that their school had contributed to its development.

Principals differed in their opinion of how clearly the Department had defined the role. Thirteen Principals found the role statement 'clear'; a further six considered it 'quite well' defined. Four Principals thought it 'satisfactory' or 'good enough' for recruitment purposes. Two Principals felt that the role statement was 'loose' and needed to be tightened to provide schools with more direction on how to fill the role.

Few Principals regarded a broadly defined role statement as a negative, however. Ten Principals argued for a broad definition as it allowed them, in the words of one respondent, 'to tailor the role significantly to meet school and student needs.' Another noted:

> Originally the focus was around addressing bullying behaviours, among both perpetrators and the victims. The role has significantly morphed, however, because anti-social behaviours do not occur in isolation. There are usually significant problems underlying negative behaviours. Thus even though the original role as defined by the Department addressed bullying and was intended to support schools to proactively reduce the incidence of bullying, the role has become so much more. The SSO now implements initiatives and programs for identified social groups as a preventative measure before any anti-social behaviour eventuates.

One Principal, who reported that the Department had provided 'very adequate written role descriptions,' also took advantage of training provided in Sydney:

> My SSO and I together attended training in Sydney shortly after her commencing the position.... The Sydney briefing thoroughly explained aspects of the SSO role, like working with students, parents, teachers and agencies. The hours of work, leave provisions, pay, resourcing and training were all covered in great detail.

While the role statement came up often in consultations with staff, students who took part in the workshops appeared very clear about what the SSO role meant to them, despite not having seen the role statement itself.

4.2   Recruitment

Principals who had recruited their SSO were asked what they took into account when choosing someone to fill the role. Of the 25 Principals who responded to this question, 23 nominated qualification(s) and experience as the most important selection criteria. Knowledge of the school and local community rated highly for 16 Principals.

Two Principals reported having taken age into account. As one who had recruited a younger SSO explained:

> I have a younger SSO, and quite frankly, [the students] talk to her, they seek her out. It's a factor. She can engage in the conversations around social media because she knows exactly how it works.

Some SSOs questioned whether schools had the capacity to select candidates for a position with a non-school-focused skill set. One SSO suggested that at least one person with a social work background sit on SSO selection panels.

4.3   Departmental induction

All SSOs had attended an induction session run by the Department. Those who began during one of the major recruitment waves had attended at least one induction session in Sydney; some had been to several. Departmental representatives provided individualised inductions for SSOs who commenced in the position outside of the major recruitment waves.

Table 5: Timeliness of Departmental induction

Induction completed within...	Tally	Cumulative
Two weeks	17	42 %
Two months	15	78 %
Three months	4	88 %
Six months	5	100 %
Total	41	

Source: SSO survey data

Induction usually took place in a timely manner. Fourteen SSOs underwent induction prior to or immediately upon commencing work; 17 (42 per cent) had completed their induction within two weeks. Almost four-fifths underwent induction within their first two months in the role. However, five SSOs had to wait longer than three months.

SSOs varied in how well they felt their induction session had prepared them for the role. The majority felt 'very well' or 'well' prepared (61 per cent). A further one-fifth responded that the induction had prepared them 'quite well' for the role. Seven felt that induction had only prepared them somewhat, while one felt that the induction session had not provided any preparation at all.

SSOs who attended state-wide induction sessions spoke favourably of meeting other SSOs, not only for the social and collegial contact, but because it allowed them grasp how varied the role could prove in practice:

> It was incredibly useful to talk with other SSOs.… It was useful to realise that every school is different and therefore every SSO carries out their role differently.… Individual SSOs seem to work to their own strengths and interests, what services are available in their community and the needs of their particular school community. Realising this helped to take pressure off individual SSOs, as what might be possible and fantastic in one school might not work at all in another.

Some SSOs offered suggestions to improve Departmental induction. One suggestion, common to participants, regardless of their level of satisfaction with the overall Induction process, concerned data collection. These SSOs felt that the induction should cover data collection to ensure consistency across schools.

Other suggestions for improvement generally depended on how well the respondent felt prepared for the role. Some of those who felt 'very well' prepared by the induction requested longer sessions. Others who found themselves less well prepared thought that the induction should have provided a clearer role description; some suggested that the induction did not discuss how flexible the role could prove in practice. This tension was also perceived by two 'very well' prepared SSOs, who commented that the variety of ways in which SSOs worked limited what could be achieved in a state-wide training session.

Four SSOs felt that more time should be devoted to practical training. These comments were supported by others who remarked on how valuable they had found specific training in Mind Matters and ACMA Cyber Smart programs. Three SSOs requested specialised training to help them perform their duties: group facilitation, and grief and loss, anger and anxiety management.

Three of those who felt 'well' or 'very well' prepared by the induction would have liked to attend a follow-up session. One SSO who did attend two sessions responded very enthusiastically:

> [The induction] was great. We had two [sessions] within a matter of weeks. The first one gave the basic information and the second gave us a chance to come back and revisit the training. We were also able to meet the entire cohort of SSOs – not just those who started at the same time as us. It was fantastic … to get to know what they did in their schools and create a supportive network to bounce around ideas and stresses.… It would be great to get everyone together again as face-to-face contact is so amazing and beneficial.

Some of those who waited more than three months to complete their induction offered perspectives on the impact of the delay. One person recognised that although her induction had been completed later 'due to timeframes and distance,' she 'felt comfortable' because of the support received from her school, other SSOs in her region and the Departmental Social Inclusion Advisor. But she added a caveat:

> If I did not have these supports it would have been crucial to participate in the induction training earlier.

4.4   Effective integration into Student Wellbeing Teams

Principals were asked for recommendations on how to effectively integrate the SSO role into the school. By far the most common recommendation, made by 22 of the 35 Principals who completed the survey, involved placing the SSO within the Student Wellbeing Team (SWT) or equivalent.

Some Principals explained that they had placed their SSO within the SWT to assist their transition to school-based work dictated by Departmental protocols. As one Principal offered:

> We had to train our SSO around not just how a school works, but how the Department of Education works.... Our SSO came to us from a case management role. But this is a school, with teenagers – we don't have caseloads in the same sense.

Seven Principals emphasised the importance of clearly defining the role to ensure that SSOs knew their own boundaries; some Principals also mentioned this in the context of avoiding friction between the counsellor and SSO roles.

Principals also stressed the importance of clear communication:

Schools are very busy places. The teachers who fulfil wellbeing roles all have normal teaching loads.... Communication can break down very quickly because people are extremely busy in the major roles they perform in the school. Communication must be tight and effective, and the Support Officer must be proactive in that communication.

In most schools, Student Wellbeing or Learning and Support Team (LST) meetings offered important channels of communication. Of the 43 SSOs surveyed, 38 reported attending one or both of these meetings and 37 had found them helpful. Most SSOs also attended staff meetings.

Several Principals provided very detailed descriptions on how they had integrated their SSO into their school. In all of these cases the Principal presented the SSO as 'the common thread ... ensuring communication is shared between all [Student Wellbeing] stakeholders in a timely manner.' One Principal contributed the following list:

1. attends all Wellbeing meetings
2. plays a key role at post-suspension meetings
3. writes a regular column in the school newsletter
4. participates in school camps and excursions
6. is involved in the Transition Team – Year 6 to 7 and Year 10 to 11
7. works with the Careers Adviser
8. visits at-risk students doing part-time TAFE courses

As a result of such efforts, most SSOs were satisfied with the support they received from their teaching colleagues. Forty out of 43 SSOs felt satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the support they received.

Table 6: Level of satisfaction with support from staff colleagues

Satisfaction Level	Count
Satisfied	31
Somewhat satisfied	9
Neutral	1
Somewhat dissatisfied	2
Dissatisfied	0
Total	43

Source: SSO survey data

Those who did not respond positively to the question on staff support asked to be included more and have their skills respected, even though they were not teachers:

> I feel that staff members have never really grasped the concept of what I do despite my efforts to explain it to them.... I feel that because I am not a teacher, I do not register on their radar. It would be great to have more suggestions and feedback from staff members as to what they would like me to do to help them and the students.

Even some SSOs who felt well supported by staff made similar comments:

> There needs to be a better understanding among teachers of what the SSO role entails.... There is an acceptance of the SSO role, but it is still seen as secondary and not on a par with the academic focus of the school.

One SSO suggested that the issue was not so much about staff knowing what SSOs do, but rather why it is important:

> I know this is a new position and we are breaking new ground, introducing new wellbeing programs into the school and raising the profile of positive mental health and help-seeking behaviours. I believe that once this program becomes embedded within school culture (as I strongly believe that it should be), the mental health and wellbeing literacy of both staff and students will increase.

4.5   Supervision

Supervision emerged as a key area of concern. Seven SSOs identified this as the aspect they would most like to change about the position.

Feedback from both surveys and fieldwork identified two distinct supervision needs. All SSOs required supervision from a member of teaching staff to learn school and Departmental protocol. In addition many SSOs strongly felt the need for professional supervision of the type provided to social workers.

The SSO survey asked whether SSOs were satisfied with their supervision, to describe what their supervision involved, and to suggest how it might be improved. The questions did not make the distinction between professional and administrative supervision.

Most SSOs assessed their supervision arrangements positively; 20 SSOs felt 'satisfied' and a further 13 'somewhat satisfied. However many complained of the lack of professional supervision. Three SSOs had a 'neutral' attitude. Seven declared themselves 'somewhat dissatisfied' or 'dissatisfied' because they felt like they were operating without any supervision at all.

In the absence of satisfactory supervision, many SSOs spoke of the importance of support from other SSOs and from the Social Inclusion Advisor based at State Office.

4.5.1 Non-professional supervision

Thirty-six of the 43 SSOs who responded felt satisfied with their level of administrative supervision. Most of these indicated that their Principal, Deputy Principal or Head Teacher Wellbeing oversaw their work, but many also received guidance from a range of staff members through their involvement in Learning and Support Meetings.

SSOs who were 'satisfied' with their supervision arrangements spoke of 'close working relationships' and 'constant communication' with their Principal, Deputy Principal or members of the SWT. Some also reported several layers of supervision, such as:

> … one hour a week formal supervision with my principal supervisor and informally on a daily basis with either my principal supervisor or the Deputy.

All satisfied SSOs reported receiving supervision at least once a week.

Of the 13 SSOs who felt 'somewhat satisfied' with their supervision, only half reported receiving regular supervision. Others could access supervision 'on demand' but felt that supervision should be scheduled regularly. As one SSO put it:

> My supervision happens very informally, mostly due to busy schedules and because my supervisors are overworked. Supervision happens in little chats here and there and via emails, but it can be very hard during times when I need it most and they're not there.

Some SSOs also found themselves without appropriate supervision following changes in staff. Others noted that their supervision arrangements had varied over time:

> In my first year, I had fortnightly meetings that ran for approximately one hour. These were beneficial as I was new to the position and had a lot of questions relating to the boundaries of my role and to the practical day-to-day running of the school. Now I instigate meetings with the Deputy Principal if I have concerns ... but it would still be good to have a regular, allocated time for supervision.

All of those who expressed dissatisfaction with their supervision reported receiving it on an irregular basis, and requested that formal supervision be scheduled regularly.

SSOs sought various outcomes from in-school supervision. Around one-quarter spoke of receiving feedback on their work, but few mentioned evaluating their own programs and reporting their results back to staff. Of those who mentioned receiving feedback on their work, most wanted more specific feedback on particular cases as well as support for dealing with those cases. SSOs generally saw supervision playing a coordination and oversight role in their work; only six mentioned debriefing with supervisors.

4.5.2 Professional supervision

Around one-third of SSOs mentioned access to "external" or professional supervision as a way to improve their supervision arrangements:

> Supervision provides a space for self-reflection ... and a space to reconnect you with your values. [It can help you to remember] why the work is important and decrease the overwhelming feeling that working in a school context can produce. While Learning and Support Team meetings are invaluable, they do not perform a supervisory function.... I believe SSOs need support to maintain a Mental Health and Wellbeing approach and focus within this workplace.

Many doubted that their teaching colleagues had the skills to provide them with appropriate support. Those who had come from a social work background referred to their experiences of supervision in this field, and argued that something similar should be available to SSOs. Some had felt the lack of professional supervision so keenly that they had considered or indeed had paid for supervision out of their own pocket. Others had managed to arrange external supervision with colleagues or former university lecturers.

While not acting as counsellors, many SSOs felt that their work brought them face to face with complex human issues for which they required appropriate support. An external service provider with a clinical role shared this view:

> There would definitely be a need for supervision. [The SSO] has a lot of young people crying out for help, and she's the person who responds right then and there.... The school counsellor is inundated. There's more need than can be met by the school counsellor.... The SSO does support and referrals but incidental counselling happens because of her relationships with the kids. The kids come seeking help. They might need some guidance around what to do then and there. I've observed her provide therapeutic advice around, say, anxiety – I remember her talking about a tool to use.

A school counsellor confirmed that high levels of need meant that SSOs could not avoid engaging in some counselling interactions, and expressed the view that SSOs needed to take notes on these types of interactions and to receive supervision for this work. Similarly, an SSO explained the effect of supporting students facing severe challenges:

> When I was first interviewed for this position I was told that I would not be receiving supervision as the position was not a clinical role. While this may be true, I still find myself working with students individually each day. There have been periods of time over the past year when I have felt seriously stale and exhausted.... I do not believe this is a reflection of my skills and abilities, but rather the sheer scale of the hardship and the disadvantage.

4.6   Connected Communities

One aspect of the Review brief focused on whether the SSO role had unfolded differently in Connected Communities when compared to other school communities. Three schools, including one of the focus schools, were located in Connected Communities. Staff in the focus school did not feel that being a Connected Community had influenced the implementation of the SSO role, and none of the survey responses by Principals in the Connected Communities schools raised any specific issues for Connected Communities schools.

5   The role in practice

As a new program, the SSO initiative has given schools considerable scope to adapt the role to their needs. This section reports the findings on how schools have implemented the SSO position in practice.

5.1   A "typical" week

SSOs were asked to indicate how they allocated their time. SSOs spent on average two days per week providing support and referrals for individual students. All SSOs reported spending at least some of their time working one-on-one with students. Peer-group work occupied almost one day per week, as did the organisation and delivery of programs. The remaining day was split between liaising with external agencies and providing support for parents and families. What each of these activities meant in practice is discussed in the next sections.

Table 7: SSO time allocation by activity

Activity	Minimum	Average	Maximum
	%	%	%
Organising and delivering programs	0	16	60
Providing support and referrals for individual students	10	37	70
Mentoring and mediating between peer groups	0	16	35
Providing support and referrals for parents and families	0	10	30
Liaising with external agencies	3	13	40
Other	0	8	20
Total		100	

Source: SSO survey data

Among the other activities that SSOs mentioned in their survey responses include:

- Developing the school anti-bullying plan as part of the Learning and Support Team
- Learning and Support Team meetings
- Classroom support
- Supporting Year 7 or Year 8 classes on social skills
- Coaching sport teams
- Liaising with banks and Centrelink to enable students to receive government benefits

Several SSOs mentioned their involvement in Suspension Resolution Meetings.

5.2 Organising and delivering programs

SSOs devoted on average almost one day per week to the organisation and delivery of programs. Some programs catered for small groups with specific needs. Others targeted year levels or the whole school. Many of the programs listed came up frequently in the surveys and fieldwork. The most common programs were:

- *National Day of Action against Bullying and Violence*
- *Youth Week* events
- *Mind Matters*, a mental health program for young people
- Anti-bullying sessions, including the NRL *Tackle Bullying* program
- Girls Days and Boys Days
- Mental Health Days
- Hygiene Days, including immunisation
- Stress management sessions for senior students
- Wellbeing surveys
- *The String Movement*, encouraging students to wear a string wristband to show that they reject bullying behaviour

The delivery of these activities varied. Some events were scheduled over a whole day. Others ran in short, regular sessions, for example once a week in roll call.

SSOs also organised, or assisted with, activities involving smaller groups of students focusing on a range of wellbeing and academic issues. Specific examples submitted to the Review included:

- Breakfast and Lunch Clubs (variable attendance)
- Homework Club (variable attendance)
- Study skills sessions (60 students)
- Cyber-bullying workshops (45–50 students)
- Lunch sport programs (30 students)
- Aboriginal leadership courses (30 students)
- Anger management programs, including *RAGE* and *Managing the Bull*
- *Links to Learning* (14 students)
- *Sista Speak* (10 students)
- Volunteering, e.g. at a local nursing home (10 students)
- Film project (8 students)
- Smokers program (4 students)

Not all activities took place in the school. Most SSOs accompanied school excursions and camps. Principals saw this as a valuable part of the role, particularly when at-risk students were involved.

Students generally reacted positively when their SSO was involved in out-of-school events. In one workshop students knew that their SSO organised community dance parties attended by hundreds of students from local schools. Students recognised that these events gave 'young people a chance to go out clubbing and see that you don't have to be drunk to have fun.' One student had become part of the organising committee.

Through their involvement in a broad range of activities, SSOs mixed with students and formed a basis of trust and understanding which facilitated further contact.

5.2.1 Reach and effectiveness

Among the more than 1500 students surveyed across 32 schools, 58 per cent reported having taken part in an activity organised by an SSO. Aboriginal students and those from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB) participated in slightly higher proportions. The proportion of a year group having experienced an SSO initiative increased with seniority, reaching two-thirds by Years 10 and 11.

Table 8: Proportion of students having taken part in an SSO activity

Student Group	%
Year 7	44
Year 8	64
Year 9	59
Year 10	67
Year 11	67
Aboriginal	62
NESB	59
Male	60
Female	57
All Students	58

Source: Student survey data

Student feedback on these programs varied. In one school, workshop participants spoke very enthusiastically of health and hygiene days which had taken place a year earlier and left

a great impression. However, some students struggled to remember much about anti-bullying days which had taken place only a few weeks earlier.

5.2.2 Transition support

Transition support, both from primary to high school and from high school to further education, training and/or employment, represented an important area of program delivery.

In some schools, SSOs had arranged for senior students to take part in work experience programs organised by community organisations. One student told us that this opportunity had allowed him to secure part-time work. In two focus schools students had undergone interview training, which was very apparent by the way in which they introduced themselves and spoke to the researchers.

SSOs considered their involvement in Year 7 transition activities and excursions an important part of their work. Almost 45 per cent of Year 7 students reported having taken part in an activity organised by their SSO after only one term at high school. In some schools SSOs had worked intensively with Year 7 students to tackle bullying and anti-social behaviours.

SSOs also attended information evenings for prospective Year 5 and 6 students and their families, which allowed them to introduce their role.

Some students looked to the SSO as a stable point of contact during the transition process. In one workshop a student told us how his primary school counsellor had recommended that he make contact with the SSO when he went to high school. He said that this contact had helped him adapt to the high-school environment.

5.3 Providing support and referrals for students

Principals recognised that while the SSO initiative initially focused on tackling bullying behaviours through targeted activities, 'practice and experience' had transformed the role into one providing holistic support for students. All 35 Principals who completed the Principal survey indicated that their SSO 'provides support and referrals for individual students'. Almost all rated this support as 'very important' or 'important' for their school. Only one Principal considered it 'not important'.

Table 9: Principal's views on the importance of SSO support for individual students

Very important	32
Important	1
Not important	1
Blank	1
Total	35

Source: Principal survey data

Across all schools, SSOs reported spending on average two days per week providing support and referrals for individual students. All SSOs spent at least half a day per week working one-on-one with students. Some SSOs devoted as much as 3.5 days per week to this work. Without compromising student confidentiality, the Review heard examples of SSOs listening to students talk about their problems, giving them tips on how to deal with particular situations, suggesting whom they could see for help, and also informal contact in a range of situations to build bridges with students and understand what issues they may be facing.

Table 10: Proportion of students having been helped by an SSO

Student Group	%
Year 7	51
Year 8	67
Year 9	64
Year 10	69
Year 11	72
Aboriginal	72
NESB	67
Male	63
Female	59
All Students	61

Source: Student survey data

Across the 32 schools which participated in the Student Survey, an average of 61 per cent of students reported having been helped by an SSO, a higher proportion than the 58 per cent who said that they had taken part in an SSO activity. Among Aboriginal and NESB students who took the survey, a higher average proportion stated they had received help, although small sample sizes in many schools mean these results are not statistically significant. Again, the proportion of students in each year group generally increased with seniority, although

through their involvement in transition activities SSOs had already reached more than half of Year 7 students by the end of their first term of high school.

Students who participated in the workshops often thought of the role in terms of one-on-one support. As one participant put it:

> The fact that [our SSO] is always just around when you want to talk to her is equally as important as the [other] stuff she does.

5.3.1 Building trust with students

Feedback from student workshops identified three ways by which students came into contact with an SSO. Most students had taken part in an activity which the SSO had organised. Some students had received support from the SSO following a referral by the wellbeing team. However, many students came into contact with an SSO in an informal manner.

SSOs in the focus schools took a proactive approach to making contact with students. This could involve walking around the grounds before and after school and during recess and lunch, or taking part in sport. Staff and students in these schools confirmed that their SSO made a considerable effort to be visible. One Deputy Principal remarked that he considered the "Student Support Officer" title a misnomer: 'I agree with the SS part,' he said, 'but not the O,' and argued that SSOs should be 'out and about in the school' and not holed up in an office.

The sum of these efforts had allowed SSOs to communicate their position to students. Ninety one per cent the students surveyed knew who the SSO was and what he or she did. The proportion did not significantly differ by year, sex or other demographic category.

Several Principals remarked on how their SSO had worked to foster an inclusive school culture. Comments by students in the workshops supported these assessments. One student told us that '[the SSO] is always there, walking around all the time, and if she sees you, she'll come and talk to you. These efforts gave rise to informal interactions, which provided an opportunity for young people to feel comfortable raising more serious issues. Students consistently reported finding it easier to talk with an SSO rather than a teacher or counsellor. Trust was a common theme. Students identified informal contact with their SSO as critical to establishing a trusting relationship. Students felt that their SSO had made a connection with them and knew what issues they were facing.

5.3.2 Profile of supported students

SSOs in 32 schools provided records to the review. All of these datasets covered Term I, 2014. A few SSOs also sent in records from 2013. Some SSOs had developed quite complex record keeping practices. To ensure consistency across schools, the analysis was limited to 28 of the 32 schools, and only considered those data covering Term I 2014.

The records showed that SSOs supported on average 74 students per term. Most students saw the SSO more than once, however inconsistent reporting methods made it difficult to determine the frequency of contact. Some SSOs simply noted that they caught up with the student on a regular basis for a brief chat, while others created a record for each interaction.

The source of referrals provided an insight into how well SSOs had managed to build trust with students and fit in with school executive and Student Wellbeing Teams. Around half of all referrals originated from students themselves or their peers. The remaining 50 per cent came primarily from teaching and school staff. LSTs and SWTs, which usually comprise the Head Teacher Wellbeing and Year Advisors, together accounted for 20 per cent of referrals. Principals and Deputy Principals made 17 per cent of referrals. A further 7 per cent came from classroom teachers.

Of the 2069 students who received support from an SSO in Term I 2014, 1220 were female (59 per cent). SSOs had predominantly worked with Years 7, 8 and 9, which taken together accounted for 60 per cent of all supported students.

Table 11: Source of first-time referrals

Source	Students	Per cent
Self	898	43.4
(Deputy) Principal	343	16.6
Peers	150	7.2
Learning and Support Team	145	7.0
Teacher	136	6.6
Year Advisor	135	6.5
Head Teacher Wellbeing	131	6.3
Other	118	5.7
Blank	13	0.6
Total	2069	100

Source: SSO records from 28 schools for Term I 2014.
Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Data is not consistent across all schools.

Table 12: Supported students by sex and year level

Year	Males	Females	Total
7	184	232	416
8	168	246	414
9	150	277	427
10	126	239	365
11	95	145	240
12	48	81	129
Blank			78
Total	771	1220	2069

Source: SSO records from 28 schools for Term I 2014.
Note: Data is not consistent across all schools.

 The remaining 50 per cent of referrals came primarily from teaching and school staff. Learning and Support and SWTs, which usually comprise the Head Teacher Wellbeing and Year Advisors, together accounted for 20 per cent of referrals. Principals and Deputy Principals made 17 per cent of referrals. A further seven per cent came from classroom teachers.

5.3.2.1 Gender issues

Of the 2069 students who received support from an SSO in Term I 2014, 1220 were female (59 per cent). SSOs had predominantly worked with Years 7, 8 and 9, which taken together accounted for 60 per cent of all supported students.

Males were as likely to have been helped by an SSO. Nonetheless, in one focus school the Principal noted that his female SSO had built up a particularly strong rapport with girls in the junior years. He did not feel that male students were 'missing out,' however, and pointed out that his SSO worked as a member of a team which included several male teachers who acted as mentors for young men.

Another Principal made a voluntary submission to the Review in which he set out what he argued were the clear advantages of having a male SSO:

> With the feminisation of the [teaching] profession, it is really useful to have a male SSO. A lot of our issues involve boys with teenage angst who refuse to back down in front of their mates. Our SSO is particularly effective in ensuring that disagreements do not turn into full-blown violence.

Some students are also aggressive towards teachers. Unfortunately a culture exists that sees some boys and occasionally girls respond aggressively when a teacher asks them to obey an instruction. They see this as keeping face. Giving students alternative strategies is crucial here.

In schools where the SSO was female, male students indicated that they had no hesitation in talking about their problems with a female SSO. Female students said the same in schools where the SSO was male. Some male students in one focus school even reported feeling comfortable talking about their problems with the SSO *because* she was female. One deputy principal reported that some of his female students hesitated to see a male counsellor, but would happily speak to the male SSO.

The discrepancy between the SSO and Student Survey data underlines the importance of analysing SSO records over a longer period of time, which will require standardised procedures to be adopted by SSOs and taught during induction. Indeed, Principals and staff often remarked on how quickly student needs could change from one term to the next. Two focus schools cited cyberbullying as an issue which appeared to have vanished during 2013, and SSO records from Term I 2014 confirmed that cyberbullying registered as a key issue in less than 1 per cent of first-time referrals. The most common issues were bullying, family issues, behaviour and peer conflict, which segue into the other aspects of the SSO role.

Table 13: Key issues leading to first-time referral

Issue	Students	%
Bullying	280	13.5
Family	240	11.6
Behaviour	225	10.9
Peer conflict	225	10.9
Cyberbullying	14	0.7
Other	1085	52.4
Total	2069	100.0

Source: SSO data from 28 schools for Term I 2014
Note: "Other" issues included self-esteem, attendance, friendship, mental health, transition, academic, anxiety, homelessness, grief and loss, anger, isolation, stress and inappropriate online activity. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Data is not consistent across all schools.

5.4   Mentoring and mediating between peer groups

SSOs reported spending on average the best part of one day per week mentoring and mediating between peer groups. SSO records gave a measure of the need for this work. In

Term I 2014 bullying and peer conflict accounted for almost one-quarter of all first-time referrals for individual support.

In some focus schools SSOs had organised peer mediation led by senior students. Students recognised the value of sorting out issues between students without involving staff, although student mediators were required to refer any cases involving violence. Senior students who had acted as peer mediators attended a separate roll call to discuss bullying reports submitted to them by students who were usually in Years 7 and 8. The mediators had a list of options for how to approach situations, including referral, but reported that 'most of the time [a situation] involved a misunderstanding' which a senior student could easily sort out. One junior student who had benefited from peer mediation saw her bullying problems fade into the background, and felt that other students had had similar experiences.

Inconsistent reporting methods made it difficult to assess the extent and effectiveness of peer group mentoring and mediation. Student workshops provided relatively little data because while some students volunteered anecdotes about their own personal experiences, few felt comfortable speaking on behalf of a group. SSO records often noted that referrals for bullying and peer conflict led to 'group outcomes' but lacked further information such as a link to further records relating to the follow-up work.

5.5 Providing support and referrals for families

Through their interactions with students and involvement in transition and other community activities, SSOs had come into contact with many parents and had been in a position to build up some trust.

SSOs reported spending on average one half-day per week providing support and referrals for families. SSO records for Term I 2014 revealed family issues to be among the most common reasons for student referrals (12 per cent). SSOs also kept note of meetings involving parents. Across the 28 schools, SSOs recorded an average of five meetings with parents in Term I 2014.

The same reasons that brought SSOs into contact with students – visibility, availability and an informal manner – also helped them to build bridges with families. Principals, staff and students themselves often mentioned that parents and guardians saw the SSO as more approachable than a teacher. This could be especially helpful in dealing with Aboriginal or NESB families who may lack trust in institutions like schools.

Staff at focus schools stressed that troublesome student behaviour rarely occurred in isolation, but rather may reflect a combination of factors, including those external to school.

They agreed that the SSO role had encouraged staff to take a more holistic approach to student wellbeing and understand it as a precondition to good learning outcomes.

Several Principals involved their SSO in occasional meetings with parents. Suspension Resolution Meetings were a common example, and one identified by Principals and many SSOs as an 'extremely important' part of the role. One SSO described how she would draw on her knowledge of community services to set up a package of support for families of students returning from suspension. In the words of another SSO, this wrap around support ensured 'consistency at home and at school.' Following up on the delivery of these services could involve further contact with parents, which the SSO would carry out with the permission and support of the executive or the SWT.

Even when SSOs did not attend meetings with parents, executive staff reported asking them for briefing on the student and family to prepare for meetings. In one focus school the SSO knew most of the parents of the school. In other schools SSOs gathered information about families through their contact with students. One SSO mentioned that over time, she had begun to build a reputation in the community, and students and families were more inclined to see her as someone 'in it for the long haul.' This led to increased trust and the likelihood of self-referrals, which allowed SSOs to refer not only students but also families to external agencies.

5.6   Liaising with external agencies

Connecting young people and their families with external agencies represents a key part of the SSO role. As mentioned, when students had problems at school, including bullying or being bullied, they sometimes experience other difficulties external to school that may also impact on their behaviour, and assistance from community supports was helpful in these situations.

SSOs reported spending one half-day per week liaising with external agencies. SSO records from Term I 2014 showed that SSOs attended on average 9 meetings with external agencies over the term. Thirty six SSOs said they had attended interagency meetings and 33 found them helpful for their role.

Knowledge of external agencies consistently emerged as a key strength of the SSO role. Principals stated that they did not have the time to keep abreast of the range of services available in the local community. SSO records showed that those connections had led SSOs to refer 482 students in 28 schools to external agencies in Term I 2014 alone.

Teaching staff were not alone in valuing the bridging role played by SSOs. Representatives from external agencies responsible for student wellbeing, such as the Department of Community Services, stressed the importance of having a constant, knowledgeable point of contact within the school. Community Services representatives stated that the SSO was an ally and had assisted communication with the school and enabled them to provide support to students and families.

This had occurred through means such as:

- referring students to external agencies and where appropriate attending case meetings
- joint activities in schools by the SSO and community organisations
- formal and informal liaison between external service providers and the SSO (and with the school)

One interviewee from an external agency reported that the SSO:

> ... plants those seeds for young people around getting help and accessing services. Sometimes that can take quite some time, because young people can be distrusting of other services and it's a big step to talk to someone external, a stranger they've never met before.

Respondents reported that it was often the SSO rather than other school staff who referred young people to external agencies. Two reasons were suggested for this. Firstly, the SSO is able to focus completely on student wellbeing needs, whereas other staff members have multiple roles and demands on their time. Other staff members with a wellbeing focus also have teaching or other responsibilities. The school counselling service provides counselling and psychological assessment service to students with specific support needs. Secondly, as explained above, the SSO role involves extensive contact with students.

A youth worker described how her youth centre had been approached by the SSO at the local school to see what opportunities might exist to work together. The youth worker said it had been very positive working with the SSO because the SSO had an intimate knowledge of the students and their needs.

> He has more face to face contact and 'inside info' on the young people. It's first-person contact, not second hand.

> [The SSO is] in there with the young people specifically.

This was similar to another youth worker from a different youth centre who commented:

> [The SSO] has the knowledge about the kids that the principal doesn't have.

Now it has changed a little bit in that we have a contact person who they can contact directly to discuss any issues with the young people they have from [the SSO's school]. In the past we would've gone to the principal, and probably wouldn't have got much out of them.

One of these youth workers reiterated the point that, because of the close nature of the students' relationships with the SSO, they might tell the SSO certain things that they wouldn't tell the staff at the youth centre. The SSO can then, if appropriate, pass on certain information to the youth workers about particular young people that may be relevant to their care. This youth worker also echoed the view that the SSO had a unique role in the school:

I see the role as someone who is really on the ground with the students, who isn't a teacher. [They're also] not a counsellor, but someone who is there to listen and support the young person.

SSOs can also provide a means for information to be conveyed back from community supports to the school. For example an adolescent mental health counsellor explained that she can use the SSO to inform teachers of particular approaches that would be of benefit to students who she is counselling:

If I think it's helpful for teachers for a particular client who's traumatised to do this and this and this, [the SSO] provides a gateway for those conversations when I can't go and call up every teacher that this young person has, [the SSO] can have those conversations with the school.

Connecting young people with supports and activities was an area where the SSO role generally worked very well. Students could list many programs and events that had involved community organisations and external service providers. Several external service providers described how crucial the role of the SSO was in connecting not just schools and external agencies, but also connecting external agencies with each other. They often employed metaphors such as 'bridge' or 'connector' to describe the SSO role.

Having someone in the school who knows both school and community is really important. He has knowledge of community stuff outside the school and in other services, which is really useful and important too.

[The SSO] can be our primary contact but also can be a bridge to other organisations if they are trying to find specific things. [The SSO] is community based and also school based, so is very useful for people like us.

[The SSO] is a connector between home, school, and the community. [The SSO] has been really pivotal in, for example, notifying us that one of our young kids wasn't attending school and we would never have known otherwise.

[The SSO is] an on-the-ground contact for everybody in the community. Even if they're the wrong person to be talking to about a particular issue, they can direct us to the right person.

6 Impact

SSOs achieved a number of outcomes for students, schools and communities through delivering activities, support for students and families and liaison with external agencies.

6.1 Strengthened Student Wellbeing Teams

Principals agreed that the SSO role complemented the work of existing Student Wellbeing Teams (SWTs). Of the 35 Principals surveyed, 31 thought the role slotted in "very well." The remaining four Principals thought the position had complemented the SWT "well" or "quite well."

There was slightly less agreement over whether the SSO role supported the work of school counsellors. Out of 35 Principals, 28 felt that the SSO position supported the counsellor "very well." Three Principals responded that the SSO supported the counsellor "well," two "quite well" and two "somewhat."

Principals believed that with well-defined roles and open, effective communication the SSO role could support the work of school counsellors. As one Principal explained:

> My counsellors counsel kids. My counsellor is the pointy end in terms of counselling. There is constant communication between the two. The Student Support Officer takes some of the load not of the counselling but of the productive end of the counselling – following up on programs.

Several respondents described how school counsellors and SSOs worked closely together. For example, one counsellor stated that cooperation involved the SSO seeking assistance from the counsellor when the SSO was concerned about individual students, the counsellor seeking assistance from the SSO about referrals and the two staff working together:

> The SSO will talk to me about the students she's concerned about, I follow up and will often meet with those students and do a school counsellor assessment if she is worried. Sometimes she also helps me with finding different services in the community for students. So in the past I've gone over and said, I've got this student, I think they would benefit from this sort of service, and our SSO, one of her strengths is she has worked in different youth agencies in the community, so she has a lot of knowledge in that area so she will say I've spoken to these three agencies, the availability is here, and we can do a referral to this one, and we'll work together to do those referrals.

SWT staff commented not only on how the work of the SSO had considerably freed up the Head Teacher Welfare and Boys and Girls Advisors, but also injected energy into the delivery of wellbeing programs. SSOs also provided schools with the capability to assess programs and build up an evidence base around student needs. As one Deputy Principal commented:

> If [our SSO] isn't running the program, having her sit in and review what's working for our kids is invaluable.

Executive and SWT staff valued SSOs for their knowledge of students and their families. One Deputy Principal mentioned that she could call her SSO 'about any student, and [the SSO] knows them. Her being able to identify their needs and hook them up with the appropriate agency has been hugely beneficial.'

SWT staff also identified in the SSO position similar strengths to those that students had mentioned: availability, consistency, and another 'non-threatening' layer of support between teachers and students. As one respondent put it:

> Sometimes we need somebody who isn't a teacher to source out what's really going on, and the kids really do respect it.

Above all, having another team member devoted to student wellbeing ensured that students received support:

> Before [our SSO] started there were always outstanding issues to deal with. We were running around in circles all the time. Things would be missed or would have to wait until we had time to do it. That doesn't happen anymore.

Staff workshop participants also indicated that the SSO role provided support for teaching staff. Some SSOs had addressed staff meetings on wellbeing issues, while others had communicated with teachers to ensure consistent application of student programs.

Students and staff in some schools also appreciated how the SSO role had emerged as a natural channel for all communication involving student wellbeing. Students believed that this had improved the effectiveness with which their school dealt with issues.

6.2 Connected Schools

SSOs brought considerable knowledge of external agencies to the role, or had the capacity to become familiar with what services were available in the local area. Principals and SWT staff generally saw this as the most important outcome of the SSO position. As one Principal put it:

> Principals do not have the time to make connections with the great variety of programs and agencies outside the school. Over the years I have been engaged with various efforts to coordinate [support for students] between government departments, but we have always struggled to cut through. Well, the Student Support Officer has given us that capacity.

These views were echoed by external service providers, including two Department of Community Service case managers, who stressed the need for a knowledgeable and available point of contact in schools.

Interactions with external agencies involved bringing programs into the school and matching up students to external services. Of the 35 Principals surveyed, 32 believed that having an SSO in the school had improved student engagement with community organisations.

All SSOs reported having established new links between their school and external agencies. Across the 32 schools which participated in the Student Survey, 64 per cent of students said that the SSO told them about activities and programs taking place outside the school. That proportion reached 79 per cent among Year 10 students, presumably evidence of SSO involvement in the area of work experience and linking up these students to vocational training opportunities.

6.3   Holistic support for complex and changing needs

School staff members at all levels appreciated the skills that SSOs brought to the task of supporting increasingly complex needs of young people and families. While an important component of catering for complex needs involved matching students to external programs and agencies, staff in focus schools also respected SSOs as professionals in their own right. These skills could be particularly valuable in remote locations. As one Principal commented:

> Sometimes the Child Wellbeing Unit[2] advises schools to look for support in the community. In remote communities, who do you turn to? Maybe, just maybe, a Student Support Officer might help.

Having an SSO in the school appeared to increase the willingness of students to seek support. Students in the workshops frequently drew a line between the SSO and the counsellor. One participant explained:

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[2] The Child Wellbeing Unit is a unit within DEC set up to assist mandatory reporters to make decisions about whether to report children who are at risk of significant harm to Community Services or to find alternative services for them if they are not at risk of significant harm.

> For a lot of people it's very daunting to go and see a counsellor. When you go to [the SSO], it's way more informal – it's just a conversation. With a counsellor you feel more nervous.

Some students also made the point that their parents found it less confronting when they told them that they had been to see the SSO. They contrasted this with telling their parents that they had seen the counsellor, which was 'a big deal.' This tied in with comments from staff and students about the 'non-threatening' nature of the SSO role.

Students saw their SSO neither as a teacher nor as a counsellor, but as something in between. This increased willingness to seek support and allowed wellbeing programs to take a more preventative approach. SWTs in all focus schools stated that the SSO position had allowed them to prevent many incidents. Through informal interactions with students, SWT staff had become aware of situations before they got out of hand.

SSOs have a flexibility and immediate availability that teachers, including SWTs and even counsellors, do not have. This is important for students with special needs. For one student who suffered from anxiety, this availability meant that he could access support whenever he needed it:

> Before [our SSO] was here, I'd have to go see [one particular head teacher whenever I had an attack], and I actually had his timetable so I knew when he was available. So I had to almost juggle my problems with his availability. Whereas now, if you've got something going on, you know she's there, you have almost like a rock that you can build on.

One Principal was convinced that the SSO had helped students to avoid getting into situations which would lead to suspension, and contributed data showing a 12 per cent drop in suspensions from 2012 to 2013. The same Principal also described how the SSO arranged for suspended students to attend specific programs to reduce repeat behaviours, and his data showed that this had led to a drop off of 5 per cent in the number of repeat suspensions, particularly among boys.

6.4 Awareness and prevention of bullying

Of the 35 Principals surveyed, 31 believed that having an SSO in the school had reduced bullying and 30 believed it had reduced cyberbullying. Principals cautioned against simplistic interpretations of data on bullying incidents, however. One Principal explained:

> Take an issue like bullying. There may be an increase in referrals for bullying, but as a consequence of the fact that we have put some strong planks in place to support students.

In some student workshops participants who had been at the school longer than the SSO remembered what some anti-bullying programs were like before the SSO took them on. These students said that the programs had become much more effective since the SSO had started:

> Everyone knows the facts about bullying, but one program won't change anything. But because it happens every year, we're chipping away at the problem.

6.5 Safer schools

In schools which participated in the student survey, an average of four-fifths of students said that the SSO helped them to feel safe at school, and almost three-quarters agreed that the SSO helped to make the school a safer place for all students. Of the Aboriginal students who responded to the survey, a higher proportion agreed that the SSO helped them to feel safe at school, but uncertainties due to small sample sizes meant that this result could not be used to hypothesise any particular relationship between the SSO and Aboriginal students.

Table 14: Proportion of students who agreed the SSO helped them to feel safe at school

Student Group	%
Year 7	75
Year 8	81
Year 9	86
Year 10	89
Year 11	83
Aboriginal	87
NESB	80
Male	84
Female	77
All Students	81

Table 15: Proportion of students who agreed the SSO helped to make the school safer for all students

Student Group	%
Year 7	66
Year 8	71
Year 9	71
Year 10	84
Year 11	77
Aboriginal	77
NESB	75
Male	74
Female	72
All Students	73

Source: Student survey data

6.6 Positive school cultures

All but one SSO believed that their work had helped students to become more confident and resilient, and all but two felt that their role had promoted greater respect and tolerance among students. Principals also provided a positive assessment of the impact of the SSO initiative on school culture. Of the 35 Principals surveyed, 33 believed that having an SSO in their school had improved non-academic achievement; 32 stated that having an SSO had led to improved student behaviour; 30 believed it had improved student engagement; 29 attendance; and 27 academic performance.

In schools which participated in the Student Survey, an average of more than four-fifths of students said that the SSO helped them to feel happy at school, and almost 70 per cent agreed that the work of the SSO had helped in getting students to treat each other fairly.

Table 16: Proportion of students who agreed the SSO helped them to feel happy at school

Student Group	%
Year 7	75
Year 8	81
Year 9	85
Year 10	90
Year 11	82
Aboriginal	85
NESB	82
Male	84
Female	78
All Students	81

Source: Student survey data

Table 17: Proportion of students who agreed that the work of the SSO had made a difference in getting students to treat each other fairly

Student Group	%
Year 7	59
Year 8	70
Year 9	67
Year 10	83
Year 11	75
Aboriginal	73
NESB	74
Male	70
Female	69
All Students	70

Source: Student survey data

7 Future perspectives

7.1 Principal appraisals

All principals except one were very positive about the SSO initiative, and all said they would like to see it continue:

> The SSO role is critical to the ongoing support of all students at the school. The SSO works closely with the Student Wellbeing Team and is able to provide both point-of-need and long-term assistance to students, the community and the staff. She has made incredibly strong links with outside agencies and being non-teaching has the flexibility to meet and liaise with these groups to ensure that students and parents are able to access this support. Being a non-teacher gives her a level of street credibility with some students and parents that becomes critical as a first point of call in many situations with vulnerable students. The SSO takes pressure off staff such as the counsellor and [Head Teacher Wellbeing] to allow them to be more strategic in their management of student wellbeing.

> Our SSO has been a tremendous asset to our school. She has worked effectively to produce outstanding relationships with all members of our school community and has successfully assisted in improving the attendance of students, their engagement in learning and has promoted positive relationships within our community. Our SSO has assisted and worked with our counsellor and other wellbeing staff to resolve peer conflicts and issues and increased the level of support outside agencies provide for our students. Our SSO is a highly skilled and motivated professional. The rapport she has built with our students is outstanding and she has earned the admiration and respect of the staff for the work she has done in assisting the students to be more engaged in their learning, thereby creating more productive and challenging learning environments. Our school community would be devastated and indeed poorer, if this outstanding, productive and supportive program was discontinued.

> This program is a vital one for our school, and we could not have managed this year without [our SSO].... At the start of this year there were significant issues arising from outside of school parties and poor home supervision. Fights necessitating lockdowns and referrals to DOCs and police involvement occurred. As a result of School Support Officer intervention, the impact of these incidents on the whole student community was reduced very significantly. Appropriate connections and follow-up with families and sourcing appropriate intervention programs enabled students to change their behaviours. Parents felt very, very supported and needy students were able to

> speedily access the medical and community supports that they needed.... I have been particularly impressed by the great networking with DOCs that is now ensuring that referrals are activated more quickly and appropriately. Our SSO is a vital part of our school, ensuring communication and agreed actions are followed through. In the busyness of a school day where there is not 5 day a week counselling service, and where all executives are flat out, the SSO resource has significantly reduced staff stress levels.

Most Principals agreed that the SSO position supported the work of the counsellor. Three Principals also mentioned the value of the SSO in a context where the counsellor was not available five days per week.

The one Principal who noted 'a feeling among the executive staff at this school that the [initiative] not continue' related this to 'a number of issues concerning the SSO that have had to be dealt with since her appointment.' However, he continued:

> I am appreciative of the fact that a well-functioning SSO who shows initiative and drive and who is pro-active in the broader school, and more specifically in the student welfare and learning support areas, is an invaluable asset to the school. Following this review, it may be timely to reconvene 'regional' meetings of SSOs, Principals and a welfare representative to revisit the roles of the SSO.

7.2   Interaction with parents

Many SSOs appeared unclear about whether Departmental regulations allowed them to contact parents. Some mentioned that this should be allowed to improve the effectiveness of the role. While contact between parents and schools is a sensitive area, many SSOs had substantial experience in social and youth work where they would normally contact families without authorisation. In these cases Principals felt that they should be explicitly advised to allow SSOs to interact, with executive authorisation and within the context of the Student Wellbeing Team, with families.

7.3   Conditions and school holidays

SSOs complained that the pilot nature of the program created uncertainty. Others mentioned that they would like to be paid more, or be entitled to school holidays. While some Principals expressed concerns about SSOs coming onto empty school campuses during school holidays, many SSOs reported that they used holiday time to get involved in community and

school holiday activities. This meant that student support continued in some form during the holidays, and created opportunities for interactions with students and their families. In other cases SSOs indicated that their schools had allowed them to accumulate overtime to take off parts of school holidays.

7.4   Professional development

Many Principals indicated that they involved their SSO in staff professional development. While this was not always strictly relevant to the role, these Principals wanted their SSO to gain a better appreciation of how teachers approached their work.

Many SSOs mentioned that they had been encouraged to get together for peer support. While these SSOs reported this as a positive aspect of their work, one Principal queried whether SSO meetings were being set at an appropriate professional level:

> I worry that a lot of the networking focuses on aspects of the job and not necessarily around some of the deeper professional learning – understanding where the Department is going and what kind of things are being put in place, because there is significant change happening in schools. Under Local Schools, Local Decisions, schools will have a greater ability to chart their direction while remaining within the Department. With that landscape, the support and development of SSOs will need some coordination. We as Principals are urged to form networks, and we encourage our staff to do the same. That network could drive some of the professional learning, but it still requires coordination.

8 Conclusions

The Review has found that there is overwhelming support for the SSO initiative from all the relevant stakeholder groups. Principals, school staff, SSOs, students and external organisations involved in this review all attested to the value of the SSOs and their important contribution to the wellbeing of students in the schools in which they were employed.

The SSOs complement the existing range of provision in the schools, helping school counsellors and others in the wellbeing team to perform their own roles more effectively, and linking the school with agencies and communities which can support students' and their families' wellbeing beyond the school.

It appears that the SSOs have had an impact on the school far beyond the individual children with whom they have had contact. There are strong indications that through organising programs and involving external agencies in the schools, SSOs have facilitated improvements in the wellbeing of students in a number of areas.

SSOs also appear to be well integrated into the SWTs (or equivalent) in their schools, and are generally working very well with their colleagues within. However a number of SSOs still felt that other school staff did not fully understand their role and the importance of their work within the school.

The most significant area of contention for SSOs related to professional supervision, with many SSOs feeling strongly that this should be available to them. At one level this is simply a matter of resources and priorities. However it raises much broader and more significant questions about the role of SSOs. In the course of their work, SSOs inevitably come across students who have a range of social, psychological and educational challenges. Sometimes students (and parents) talk to SSOs about personal issues. SSOs are not permitted to counsel students and are expected to refer counselling cases to school counsellors. Nevertheless, they still have to deal with many of these issues, often on a one-to-one basis with students.

Similarly, SSOs often come into contact with parents. They are not supposed to meet alone with parents, but occasionally this does seem to occur, although it is always with the knowledge and consent of the school counsellor or another senior staff member. This does not appear to be a problem for schools themselves, but it does raise questions about the strict parameters of the SSO role and how flexible these could or should be to accommodate the needs of particular schools, while also taking into account Work Health & Safety obligations and other safety requirements.

Compounding this is the fact that SSOs themselves come from very diverse backgrounds. Some are highly trained and very experienced professionals who may have had many years of experience working alone with students and/or families (and indeed may have received professional supervision as part of their role). In contrast a number of SSOs are young people with little experience and relatively few qualifications. The review found that both these groups were able to use their skills and experience to best effect within the context of their schools.

There is, therefore, a tension between encouraging diversity by allowing schools to adapt the SSO role to the individual school context and skills of the SSO, but also ensuring equitable treatment of staff and consistent parameters for the SSO role across all schools.

Despite these tensions, it appears that schools are generally managing the SSO role well. SSOs are not operating independently nor without consent from other staff members, and neither do they appear to be encroaching on the roles of school counsellors or other wellbeing professionals in the school. However their long term training and support needs will certainly need to be addressed at a policy level, and cannot only be resolved purely on a case by case basis.

Overall this Review concludes that the SSO role has provided significant benefits to those schools in which they have been working. There is certainly sufficient evidence to indicate that the SSOs have a specific and important role to play in secondary schools in NSW, particularly those with high levels of disadvantage in the school population. By leveraging opportunities in the community to further increase the impact of their work within schools, SSOs have provided value over and above the specific activities in which they have been involved.

Appendix A: Analysis of Attendance Data

In order to test the hypothesis that the SSO initiative has led to improved attendance rates, the researchers compared the attendance rates of SSO schools to those of a group of schools which had not participated in the initiative. For each SSO school, researchers attempted to find a matching school in the same local government area with a similar Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage and other indicators such as the proportion of Aboriginal and Non-English Speaking background students. Through this process 34 schools were identified, all of which presumably would have been eligible to take part in the SSO trial. This group of 34 schools is referred to as in this appendix as the control group.

The Department provided annual attendance rates for each of the SSO and control-group schools from 2008 to 2013 inclusive. Comparing data from before and after the beginning of the SSO initiative was complicated by legislation requiring students to complete Year 10 and then continue in either education and training or full-time paid employment until at least age 17. This legislation came into effect in January 2010, and had a significant impact on attendance rates in 2011.

Figure 2: State, SSO and control average attendance rates
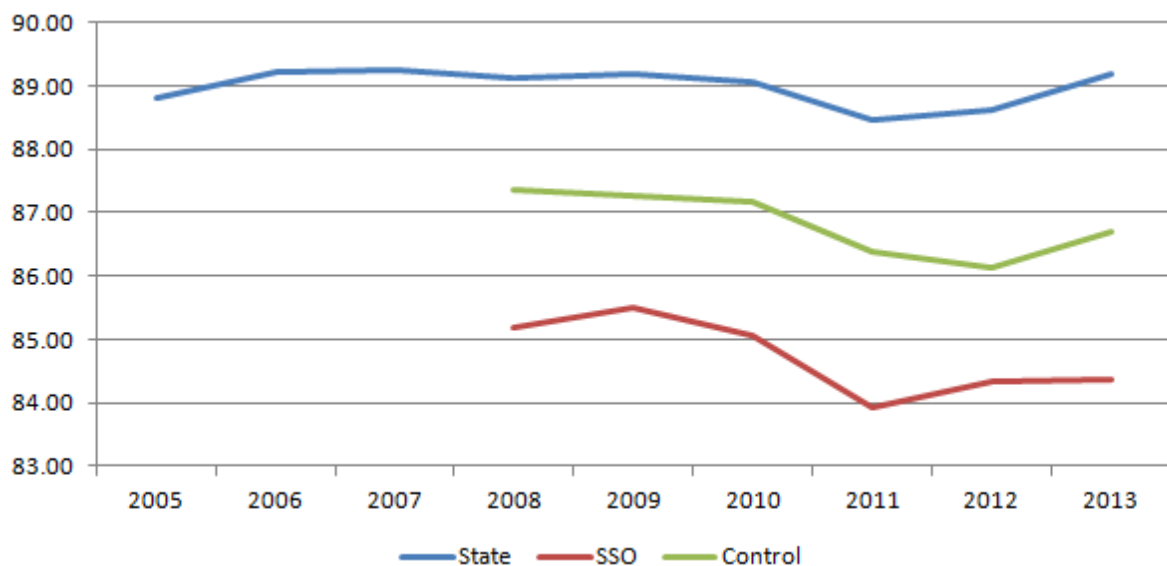
Source: Department data

In this context, it is difficult to test the hypothesis that the SSO initiative led, on average, to improved school attendance. For example, it may appear reasonable to test the difference in attendance rates between 2013 and 2011, the year in which the SSO initiative began. Proceeding as though a random control experiment had been carried out, the 34 control

schools give a mean increase of 0.41 per cent with a sample standard deviation of 1.80 per cent and a standard error of 0.059 per cent, while the 47 SSO schools (excluding three outliers) give an increase of 0.52 per cent with a sample standard deviation of 1.78 per cent and standard error of 0.076 per cent. Applying a standard z-test yields a difference of means of 0.180 and a standard error of 0.096, or a z-score of 1.871 equivalent to a P-value of 3.07 per cent, a statistically significant result. Unfortunately, a glance at the average attendance rate trends shows that this hypothesis would not be confirmed if 2012 rather than 2011 had been used at the base year.

It should be noted that the Review invited Principals to submit data which they felt would show an impact of the SSO in their school. All Principals resisted submitting data to the Review, and many explicitly noted in their survey comments that they did not believe the effectiveness of the SSO should be assessed using whole-of-school data. If this is so, any future study of the SSO role will need to determine what objective data can be used to triangulate other types of data such as those collected during this Review.

Appendix B: Analysis of Survey Data

Results from the student survey are presented as a school-based average rather than a pooled average of the 1564 students who completed the survey. These calculations involve two separate sources of error. First, there are the errors involved in estimating, based on the sample of students who completed the survey, the parameter for each school. Second, there is the uncertainty which follows from the fact that 12 schools did not participate in the survey.

Conservative estimates for both sources of error are straightforward to calculate because the figures presented throughout this report show only the proportion of 'yes' responses. In this case, the standard error attains a maximum when 50 per cent of respondents answer 'yes'. When the number of survey responses in each school is taken into account, the standard error of the average over the 32 schools equals 8.2 per cent. This calculation relies, of course, on the assumption that the students who took the survey were randomly selected. When the error due to estimating the parameter for the remaining 12 schools is included, the standard error increases to 9.1 per cent. Even when the proportion of 'yes' responses deviates from 50 per cent, the uncertainty in these calculations remains large, and increases for subsets of the student population. These errors must be kept in mind when interpreting the tables showing student survey results.