

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

STUDY OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELLING SERVICE IN NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

The Northern Territory Department of Education engaged Dr Chris Barrett to undertake a study of the School Counselling Service in Northern Territory Government Schools. The study commenced in June 2017.

The aim of the study was to make recommendations that would inform the further development of the School Counselling Service, so that it is fit for the Northern Territory context.

Face-to-face focus groups and individual interviews were conducted over a 16-day period with 56 participants. Participants included 24 school counsellors, 10 principals and assistant principals, three teachers, three parents and nine regional office staff. Questionnaires were circulated to principals. Parents and staff from Maningrida College represented Aboriginal voice in the study.

The study found that the core function of the School Counselling Service is to promote the social and emotional wellbeing that is critical for student engagement in schooling. This is important because it gives students the chance to achieve their best learning outcomes so they have the opportunity to reach their potential.

The study also found that the School Counselling Service provides support for student wellbeing and learning, from a whole-school perspective, with a strong focus on prevention. School counsellors support schools and students in urban, remote and very remote locations, in a culturally diverse context, where students often have multiple and complex needs. The tyranny of distance adds to the challenges of the work of the School Counselling Service.

The study identified strengths and weaknesses in the delivery of the School Counselling Service, and the recommendations consequently focussed on “consolidation and expansion of the service”.

Key issues included decentralised management arrangements, resulting in loss of professional support and opportunities for informal debriefing; a lack of Aboriginal School Counsellors assigned to schools; lack of employment security for some practitioners; immature quality assurance protocols; historically driven allocation of School Counselling Service support to schools; limited access to professional learning opportunities and poor induction processes for new school counsellors. Poor understanding of the role of school counsellors in some schools was found to impact on the quality of service they could provide.

Key strengths of the School Counselling Service model in Northern Territory Government Schools are the dedication and commitment of the highly skilled team of School Counsellors and the allocation to schools of regular service times. Regular service times allow for a focus on prevention rather than reaction or leaving issues until they require complex intervention.

Alternative service delivery models for the School Counselling Service that address the identified weaknesses and capitalise on the strengths should be considered. However, the impact of financial constraints on the implementation of alternative service models that involve additional human resources was acknowledged.

The report recommendations, based on the information gathered from the consultation process covered five key areas:

Key Area 1: Service Management

Key Area 2: Professional Issues

Key Area 3: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge for Wellbeing

Key Area 4: School and System Capacity Building

Key Area 5: Documents, Records and Reports

Based on the identified strengths and weaknesses, several themes emerged from these key areas:

- acknowledgement of the school counselling service as a specialist service that supports schools in the learning and wellbeing journey for all students;
- the need for more professional support for school counsellors, such as greater access to professional supervision, professional learning, advocacy and opportunities for informal debriefing;
- the need for investment in professional learning that meets the needs of advanced practitioners in school settings
- the importance of developing genuine professional pathways for Aboriginal people in the wellbeing for learning context
- the importance of improving record keeping practices for better service continuity.

Overall, the study found that:

“there is a will in the Northern Territory Government and Department of Education to support the development of the School Counselling Service, but a lack of determined strategic planning, ... to bring it into effect” (p.75).