VPA Position Paper

Student Support Services

The Victorian Principals Association (VPA) supports and endorses the provision of Student Support Services Officers (SSSO) in government schools. The VPA acknowledges that students are better prepared for learning when they are healthy, safe and happy and that student wellbeing is the responsibility of staff working in a whole school context.

Purpose

The VPA notes that the 'Strengthening Networks and School Communities: Guidelines for Student Support Services' (Strengthening networks and school communities: Guidelines for student support services (Word - 3.2Mb) outlines the principles, arrangements and the additional resources provided to strengthen student wellbeing and support services. The Guidelines also address the concepts of 'continuity of care' and 'partnerships between the school and the community' as the key to improving the services provided to students and their families.

VPA considers the role of SSSO's as essential, therefore increased hours and consistent support according to individual student need is vital for positive student learning outcomes.

Background to the VPA Position

The VPA position has been determined in the following context:

- Reduced support hours for some students
- Increased turnover of SSSO's within the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD)
- A decrease in services and positions left unfilled
- Insufficient & irregular SSSO's availability. NB. Triage model of delivery prioritises- Critical Incident Response and Student 'at risk' Assessments, at the expense of regular School Support Services to our schools
- Failure to provide services (anecdotal evidence suggests at least 40% of requests have been refused at least one school). Due to understaffing, it is common for a lengthy referral process to result in SSS suggesting referring clients to external providers and practitioners. School staff can, and do, manage this independently when considered appropriate (e.g. referrals to Child First or GPs). A referral to a SSSO for intervention, which then only results in a referral to an external provider, is pointless and inefficient.
- Restructure has dislocated relationship-building within schools
- Leadership / Management roles assigned to many SSSO's, detracts from service time to schools. ie. Additional funds being spent on SSS administration rather than on SSS provision (*Estimated to be 20+% of all SSS funding)
- The online referral system will need to be carefully monitored to ensure claims of greater efficiency simplification
- There is massive understaffing in the area of SSS provision
- There are concerns about the use of funding savings across certain regions
- Wellbeing of SSS staff is still a major issue
- Current SSS remuneration rates are unsatisfactory

- Inadequate budget allocation to properly support the reported increase in the number of students identified as being prevented from learning at expected rates by a range of disabilities
- Statistics still quote 3.5% of school population are in the category of Disabled and Impaired, but this is no longer accurate, as the statistics are now higher
- Students with language disorders are a hidden group as the majority do not meet the stringent and behaviourally biased PSD funding criteria. Hence, these students do not receive adequate support.
- The process of referral is time consuming and is unduly challenging when there is no history available, such as for Prep students who didn't attend kindergarten or who are refugees with no documentation
- Schools' access to services is currently low and highly variable according to location
- Historical model of funding maintains inequity
- Regions need to pull back from appointment of staff before the new model is operational in order to avoid over staffing and too many ongoing staff allocated to schools

VPA Position

Following a comprehensive evaluation of current SSS provision model the VPA position on effective SSS service delivery across Victorian Government Schools is consistent with increasing school accountability and responsibility and is as follows:

1. Schools:

- SSS funding to be allocated directly to a group of schools' so that they take responsibility for employing and managing their own SSS staff. NB. Psychologists, / Social Workers and Speech Pathologists. Where appropriate, schools will be encouraged to employ SSS staff on a shared (Split ledger) basis
- There is an obvious need to increase base SSS funding levels for disadvantaged, rural and smaller schools
- There should be an overall examination of the funding levels to address the inequities with consideration to factors such as SFO, Rurality, Growth, Stages of Schooling etc
- Increase in SSS student ratios at the service delivery to student needs
- Consistent individual SSS support of individual students to increase student learning capabilities
- Support for schools to prepare PSD applications and streamlining of the process
- Increase funding to assist with the cost of PSD assessments
- Extend the timeline for accepting Prep applications so that these are accepted at all times

2. SSS Networks:

- SSS staff employed by schools to be formally timetabled to meet at least twice a term to discuss issues of concern, share best practice and partake in appropriate professional learning
- Network schools to readily provide SSS to one another in times of urgent need
- Consistent and equitable level of service provided across all networks

3. Regions:

- Regions to be responsible for management and delivery of 'Visiting Teacher' support services
- Continued funding to Networks to use independent agencies to undertake PSD assessments e.g. Lewis and Lewis.
- Regions to ensure transparency of SSS system delivery and report regularly to schools and DEECD centrally during this transition time.
- DEECD partnerships with SSS service providers increased and targeted for specific times of need e.g. Black Saturday.

4. General:

- Referral process to be time efficient and response time effective; not delayed by paper warfare. NB. Proposed Online Referral System must be pragmatic and time saving
- Program for Students with Disabilities assessments to be funded on top of existing SSS allocation
- Clear DEECD / Regional guidelines/ Network guidelines regarding roles, responsibilities and contacts including:
    - Key SSS contacts in each network
    - Roles and responsibilities of SSS staff in Regions & Schools
    - Role in PSD timelines, reviews and appeals
    - Complaints processes
    - Critical incidents
    - Autistic Assessments
    - Network responsibilities
- Factors such as rurality, mobility and SES need to be considered for supplementary funding
- Provision of competitive wage levels, administration staff and adequate funding to be included in the new model.
- Open and staged transition to the new model is needed

The VPA advocates strongly for increased funding for Student Support Services in primary schools.