Victorian Principals Association

Unit 2, 13-21 Vale Street, North Melbourne Victoria 3051, Australia

t: (03) 8379 4000   f: (03) 9326 9950   e: info@vpa.org.au   w: www.vpa.org.au

VPA Position Paper

Student Support Services

Position

The Victorian Principals Association (VPA) calls for increased levels of support and region / area consistency of funding across Student Support Services (SSS) to encourage positive student learning outcomes. Students are better prepared for learning when they are healthy, safe and happy. The VPA supports and endorses the provision of Student Support Services Officers (SSSO) in government schools.

Background to the VPA Position

The VPA position has been determined in the following context:

Staffing Provision

- Massive understaffing in the area of SSS provision has resulted in a decrease in services with insufficient and irregular SSSO availability and reduced support hours for students.
- Increased turnover of SSSO's within the Department of Education and Training (DET) and positions left unfilled.
- Current SSSO remuneration rates are unsatisfactory and often fail to attract and hold quality applicants.
- Arrangements for Base School housing are inadequate and often lead to costs borne by the host school.

Funding

- 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.
- Growth areas have not been given any extra funding.

Disabilities

- Statistics still quote that 3.5% of the school population are in the category of Disabled and Impaired, but this is no longer accurate as statistics are now higher. There are more children diagnosed but unfunded.
- 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.

Roles and Responsibilities

- Leadership / Management roles assigned to many SSSO's detract from service time to schools. Additional funds are being spent on SSS administration rather than on actual SSS provision (*Estimated to be 20+% of all SSS funding).

Case Management

- The online referral system is in need of careful monitoring to ensure claims of greater efficiency and simplification are valid. Indications are that this is not the case.

- Due to understaffing, it is common for a lengthy referral process to result in SSSO's 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.
- New model of delivery (priority based or "triage") is neither desirable nor does it meet the needs of schools.

Regional/Area Management
- The new model of provision (via areas) has completely removed any leadership by principals – this was never requested and is not desirable.
- Transparency with the funding arrangements is no longer apparent through the new provision model.

Service to Schools
- Schools' access to services is highly variable according to location. The historical model of funding maintains inequity, even with the new regional model.
- The model of delivery appears to be inconsistent with the feedback given by schools and network principals.

VPA Position

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

1. Staffing Provision
- Provision of competitive wage levels, administration staff and adequate funding to be included in the model. This must include money to provide administration support for the Network Coordinator.
- An increase in SSS student ratios at the service delivery level to address student needs.
- Increased funding is required for:
   - A ratio of at least 1 psychologist/social worker per 1000 students.
   - A ratio of at least 1 speech therapist per 1000 students.
   - Consistent individual SSS support of individual students to increase student learning capabilities
   - Accommodation and base room management, so that schools (often small schools) are not out of pocket in any way. This needs to include running costs, maintenance costs, cleaning and resourcing

2. Funding
- An immediate overall examination and review of funding levels to address inequities to be undertaken.
- An equity-based funding model be applied to ensure that all Areas are provided with an appropriate share of current funding. A model that provides a base per student amount, plus the factoring in of disadvantage would provide a transparent model of funding allowing networks to manage funds and staff effectively.
- Annual funding adjustments to Areas, based on enrolment and other changes. The annual application of a funding model, as schools have with the SRP, makes sense.

3. Disabilities
- The referral process must be time efficient and response-time effective; not delayed by paper warfare.
- Extend the timeline for accepting Prep applications so that these are accepted at all times.

- An immediate review of the disabilities funding model, with accepted, internationally researched needs identified and funded. Any student requiring any level of program adjustment should receive funding separate to SRP.
- Program for students with disabilities assessments to be funded outside of existing SSS allocation.

4. Roles and Responsibilities

- Clear DET / Regional / Area guidelines/ Network guidelines to be formulated regarding roles, responsibilities and contacts including:
    - Key SSS contacts in each network.
    - Roles and responsibilities of SSS staff in Regions and schools.
    - Role in PSD timelines, reviews and appeals.
    - Complaints processes.
    - Critical incidents.
    - Autistic assessments.
    - Network responsibilities.
    - Supervision expectations
    - Management of SSS and administrative processes such as underperformance, misconduct and complaints
    - VPS versus ES conditions
    - Attracting staff

5. Case management

- SOCs to be monitored and improved according to needs and feedback.
- An emphasis on service to schools ensuring adequate and effective intervention for students with needs and at risk.

6. Regional/Area management

- A Principal Consultative Executive Group to be formed in every area, with access to all information pertaining to service delivery and staffing of SSS and involvement, as Executive Officer, from the VPS6.
- Regions / Areas to ensure transparency of SSS system delivery and to report regularly to schools and DET.
- DET partnerships with SSS service providers increased and targeted to handle specific times of increased need e.g. Black Saturday.

7. Service to schools

- Emphasis to service in schools to be returned, with weekly contact across the streams for all schools, regardless of size.
- Service provision appropriate to accepted norms – 1:1000.

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