

It's time for the Government to make wellbeing in schools a priority



Angelo Gavrielatos
President
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A long period of drought, catastrophic fires and a disrupted school year amid the uncertainty, fear and anxiety attached to the COVID-19 pandemic has made for a perfect storm as far as the mental health of young people is concerned.

At its worst it has resulted in suicide clusters but teachers and principals have been raising the issue of the deteriorating mental health of their students for some time.

Federation is aware of these concerns, confirmed by a recent survey of members in which 98 per cent of teachers and 99 per cent of principals said the number of students with mental health issues has increased in the past three years.

I would like to thank those who responded to the survey, which has put a spotlight on a situation that has been bubbling below the surface of school life not just for students but for teachers, school counsellors and principals as well.

The survey of 5346 teachers and principals, conducted by Federation between 24 September and 1 October, also revealed a quarter of students are waiting more than four weeks for counsellor support.

Our school counsellors are dedicated, committed professionals doing all they can. But, their case load is totally unrealistic, unmanageable and unacceptable.

This was acknowledged in the survey with a total of 98 per cent saying achieving a school counsellor to student ratio of 1:500 should be an urgent priority.

With students' learning and wellbeing highest on your mind, their unmet need for mental health support and related issues are taking their toll on you. Workload and the complexity of the job has continued to climb while support services have fallen away.

This concern is appreciated by University of Sydney *Professor of Psychiatry*, Ian Hickie, who told the Gallop Inquiry that the expectations parents and the wider community place on teachers puts teachers on the very frontline of managing an emerging youth mental health crisis, which is expected to grow by up to 30 per cent over the next decade.

Our campaign demands an average of at least one school counsellor for every 500 students and increased



funding for public schools so that students' mental health issues can be adequately addressed by the system and its allied health services.

These improvements are urgent and vital for the wellbeing of students **and** members.

Funding and resources for public schools at the very core

A report by former World Bank and Australian Government economist Adam Rorris has put tangible figures to the disparity we know exists in the lopsided equation that funds private and public schools.

Mr Rorris's independent report has revealed Australian public schools will miss out on \$19 billion in funding over the next four years, as the sector was completely overlooked in the recent federal Budget and while private schools continue to be overfunded by \$1 billion.

State and federal governments should take a bow; this is a national disgrace.

The report shows NSW public schools will be denied \$5.5 billion in funding over the four years, while private schools in NSW will be overfunded to the tune of \$806 billion.

On a student by student level, private school students are overfunded by \$816 while those in public schools are underfunded by \$1525 each.

The glimmer of hope we had in 2013 with the introduction of a new school funding system under the Gonski reforms, aimed at restoring some equity into school funding and therefore greater opportunity for kids, was extinguished with the election of the Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison governments.

The most exasperating aspect of this assessment is that if there was any hint of even the slightest reining in of this scandalous situation, the heads of the private school system would go ballistic yet for the past 20 years we have not heard a peep from those responsible for administering and supposedly looking after our public schools.