

Lack of school counsellors put students at high risk

November 01, 2020

Research by Federation has underlined the urgent need for more school counsellors in NSW with 98 per cent of teachers and 99 per cent of principals stating that the number of students with mental health issues has increased in the past three years.

The study also highlighted the urgent need to grow the ranks of school counsellors, indicating that a quarter of the state's students are waiting more than four weeks for counsellor support.

In late September, Federation was a signatory to an open letter to NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian, joining experts to call for urgent action to address youth mental health in response to a rise in youth suicides in such a calamitous year.

The letter, published in *The Sunday Telegraph* on 27 September, asks the State Government to consider providing teachers with training to better identify potential mental health issues, for speedy referral of students and, importantly, increase the number of counsellors in schools.

The letter — endorsed by Sydney University Brain and Mind Research Centre co-director Professor Ian Hickie, 2014 Australian of the Year Professor Pat Mc-Gorry, founding CEO of headspace Chris Tanti and rugby league star (and mental health first aid instructor) David Shillington, among others — was prepared in response to a cluster of student suicides on Sydney's North Shore and the NSW South Coast.

At the same time, Federation conducted a survey of more than 5300 teachers and principals between 24 September and 1 October, with findings overwhelmingly in support of the open letter, which stated that the ratio agreed to in 2018 of 500 students per counsellor was never reached.

The Government's own figures show that the ratio now stands at one counsellor for every 743 students across the state.

Federation President Angelo Gavrielatos said the survey results were deeply concerning and the NSW Government needed to act.

"This is a totally unacceptable situation. The waiting period for students to get access to a school counsellor must be so distressing for parents," he said.

Key points from the survey of teachers and principals reveal:

- overall, only 20 per cent of teachers and principals say a school counsellor is at their school every day, while only 4 per cent of primary schools have a counsellor on site daily



- only 5 per cent believe the level of school counsellor support at their school is adequate
- on average, more than one quarter of students wait more than four weeks to see a school counsellor. The figure rises to 48 per cent for students in need of support in primary schools
- bushfires, drought and COVID-19 are significant contributing factors, with 91 per cent of respondents saying the pandemic has led to an increase in children with mental health concerns at their school
- 98 per cent said reaching a ratio of one counsellor for 500 students should be an urgent priority.

Federation has also warned that the NSW Government's announcement to embed 100 nurses in schools across NSW — to support students with general and mental health issues at a cost of \$46.8 million — should not come at the expense of more school counsellors.

Federation President Angelo Gavrielatos said teachers and principals would “definitely welcome any professional health expertise” but the nurses are not a replacement for school counsellors.

“School counsellors are people who have dual qualifications as a teacher and a psychologist so they have that specific expertise that draws together the two disciplines and are best placed to provide that assistance to students,” he said. “It’s all well and good to have nurses in schools, but we need both.”