



AASW

Australian Association
of Social Workers

Inquiry into discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools

Parliament of Tasmania

JULY 2024

About the Australian Association of Social Workers

Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the national professional body representing more than 17,000 social workers throughout Australia. To be eligible for AASW membership, applicants are required to hold a Bachelor of Social Work, or a Social Work Qualifying Master's degree.

The AASW works to promote the profession of social work including setting the benchmark for professional education and ethical practice in social work, while also advocating on matters of human rights to advance social justice.

Acknowledgements

This submission has been developed in consultation with our members who are working across Australia in various social work areas of practice and, by consultation with our

For further information or questions relating to this submission, please contact:

Angela Scarfe

Senior Policy Advisor

[REDACTED]

Executive Summary

With our unwavering dedication to defending human rights of children, the AASW refers the Committee to the obligations of all Australian governments under international agreements such as:

- a. The Convention on the rights of the child (CROC) and its focus on the need of every child to grow up in an atmosphere of acceptance as a necessary condition of their development.
- b. The Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and its inclusion of health as one of these rights.
- c. The definition of health and well being as outlined by the World Health Organisation, and its emphasis on the full flourishing and participation of every person in their community to the fullest possible extent.
- d. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability and its endorsement of all the above documents.
- e. Sustainable Development Goal 4: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education...for all'.

We urge the Tasmanian government to accept these as the guidelines by which the current reform process can improve the outcomes for every child and young person in Tasmania. Fulfilling these obligations confers a positive duty on all schools to promote the mental health and wellbeing of all students by creating inclusive, respectful environments and eliminating bullying. At school level, this requires that leaders combine their responses to problematic student behaviour, with their programs to enhance mental health into a coherent, whole-of-school strategy. The workforce who can deliver on this vision is already in existence and available for this work.¹ School work is a highly valued, clearly defined, well-established, specialised area of practice that responds to the needs of the student population and school community. It's contribution to the wellbeing of students has been recognized by the Productivity Commission. The AASW concurs with the Productivity Commission that social workers should be employed widely throughout Tasmanian schools.

Recommendations

The AASW recommends:

- That schools in Tasmania be funded to employ school social workers at a minimum ratio of 1 social worker to every 500 students.
- That the current student wellbeing program which funds chaplains and counsellors be terminated and be replaced with school social workers as specified above.

¹ (Testa, 2023)

Context for this submission: school social work

The social work profession in Australia is based on an abiding respect for all persons and the principles of social justice and professional integrity. The AASW's vision is one of "Wellbeing and Social Justice for All". To fulfill this vision, the AASW works toward a society in which all people can thrive, develop their potential, contribute to their community, and pursue lives of meaning and purpose. To create such a society, it is necessary to ensure that all people enjoy the fulfillment of all their rights under the International Bill of Rights (IBR).²

Professional social workers consider the relationship between biological, psychological, social and cultural factors and how they influence a person's health, wellbeing and development. Social workers work with individuals, families, groups and communities, across a wide range of settings including schools. Across every field, they maintain a dual focus on improving human wellbeing; and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that detract from wellbeing, such as inequality and discrimination.

School social work is a well-established specialist area of social work practice and an example of the unique contribution that social work can make to the mental wellbeing of young people. The 'person-in-environment' approach of school social workers directs attention to the student's individual circumstances, and to the school environment simultaneously. They intervene at both levels to remove barriers, resolve conflict and create a safe and inclusive school community. Many school social workers also have expertise in leadership and management. Their expertise in program design and implementation makes them skilled in ensuring an inclusive and affirming environments for all members of the school community.

School social workers have been employed in Australian schools for more than 65 years. To recognise the expertise of many of its members, the AASW has introduced the Accredited School Social Worker Credential. This credential provides a means of signaling that these AASW members have acquired significant expertise over an extended period and have attained leadership status in this field. The AASW members who attain this level will have a track record of implementing programs with all members of a school community, at all levels of the school organisation to ensure the school actively promotes the rights of all students to an education and to the highest attainable level of health.

² By this term we include: The International Bill of Rights (encompassing: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNHDR); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); First Optional Protocol to ICCPR; Second Optional Protocol to ICCPR); Convention on Status Relating to Refugees; Convention on the Rights of the Child; Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; Convention on the Rights of Peoples with a Disability; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination; Convention on the Rights of Older Peoples; and, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Particularly Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

Our responses to the Terms of Reference

(b) inquire into and report upon the measures necessary to prevent and remedy discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools in regard to students and staff;

We note that the Department of Education, Children and Young People's (DECYP's) Student Behaviour Management Policy (BMP) situates its provisions within a rights-based framework, which calls for harm minimization, trauma-informed responses, restorative practices, and ensuring that all children and young people are heard and included.³ We endorse that vision which underlines the program.

The experience of school social workers is that embedding such a vision into schools requires an active, constructive approach to fostering a sense of belonging, encouraging participation and engendering respect for every member of the school community (i.e students, teachers and parents). This work requires more than responding to bullying, which occupies most of the BMP document. It requires dedicated efforts to prevent all forms of discrimination, exclusion and bullying among all members of the school community.

The current version of the BMP falls short of mandating or inspiring the work that is needed in every school to embed that vision. Although it contains a section titled: "preventing bullying", that section merely comments on what is already occurring. It:

- describes it as the responsibility of the whole community,
 - notes that bullying has a serious impact on students,
- ██████████ schools are using a range of approaches.⁴

In contrast to this minimalist approach, school social workers have observed many instances of schools creating an inclusive environment that avoids bullying. Starting with official policy statements of expectations and accountability arrangements, department staff, school leaders and wellbeing staff work together to embed procedures and behaviours that promote and facilitate inclusion and acceptance.

It is no co-incidence that student welfare staff such as school social workers have participated actively in this work. Whether or not a school environment fosters respect and inclusion carries direct consequences for the mental health and wellbeing of its students. Wellbeing staff receive direct insights into the elements of a school's operations which are either enhancing or detracting from students' wellbeing. With their unique 'person-in-environment' orientation, school social workers translate these insights into recommendations for reforms of schools' practices. Therefore, the AASW's position is that schools should have sufficient access to school social workers to enable them to undertake this work in every school. The AASW recommends that school social workers should be funded as part of the mainstream staffing allocation of all schools, at a ratio of one social worker to every 500 students.

³ (Department for Education, Children and Young People, 2023)

⁴ *ibid*

(c) examine the obligations and duties of Tasmanian schools under the Anti Discrimination Act 1998 and other relevant statutes and policies in regard to students and staff;

Anti-discrimination legislation is only one of the sources for the AASW's expressed vision of "respect for persons, and social justice".⁵ This submission has already described the multiple human rights obligations on Australia and its states and territories, from which we derive our goals for policy improvements.

Together, these statements provide principles on which the AASW believes that all schools should base their policies and programs concerning the behaviour and wellbeing of students and staff. They direct attention to the importance of:

- creating inclusive school communities that respect and value every member (including staff and parents),
- responding to problematic behaviours through a trauma-informed lens, and calling on restorative justice principles,
- providing every young person with education and wellbeing experiences that are tailored to their needs and recognise their strengths,
- eliminating discrimination, exclusion harassment and bullying,
- establishing professional standards and accountability mechanisms to maintain services at the highest possible quality.

All of these tasks are within the scope and skillset of school social workers.⁶

(d) examine and recommend what efforts are being made and should be made towards meeting those obligations by Tasmanian schools in regard to students and staff;

The website of the DECYP currently lists social workers as part of the professional wellbeing staff, who are available to students after a referral by parents or guardians. Although the website says that social workers can be accessed by all students, it does not specify the actual ratio of social workers to students nor the current availability or waiting lists.⁷

The AASW notes that there are other staff who are available as generalist wellbeing staff and who are based in schools. These are provided under the national scheme that grew out of the contested chaplaincy program.⁸ In the evaluation of the chaplaincy program, the AASW argued that the current level of qualifications required for that position is inadequate for the complexity of that role. Assessing the mental health needs of students, and ensuring that all students receive the appropriate, timely response requires a higher level of expertise than the role description describes..⁹

Another shortcoming of the national wellbeing program is that the roles funded under this program have no authority to work with staff, nor at the level of organizational improvement described above.¹⁰ Therefore, they can only make a limited contribution to the process of

⁵ (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020)

⁶ (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2023)

⁷ (Department of Education, Children and Young People, 2024)

⁸ (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024)

⁹ (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2022)

¹⁰ (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024)

embedding a whole school approach to the wellbeing of the school community, as has been recommended by this submission.

The AASW maintains its long-held position that all mental health and wellbeing roles in schools must:

- a. be filled by professionals with the qualifications, knowledge and skills to work with all members of a school community and make changes at all levels of the organisation,
- b. provide effective evidence informed mental health interventions,
- c. lead the implementation of the behaviour management program to ensure it is trauma informed and restorative,
- d. communicate with all levels of management and all stakeholders to build engagement in the school's approach.
- e. be subject to standards and accountability mechanisms such as Codes of Ethics, Practice Standards and complaints mechanisms,
- f. actively promote the rights of children and young people.

Social work literature, and AASW standards demonstrate that all the above are within the professional scope of a school social worker¹¹. Appendix A contains an example of a school social worker's leadership in establishing and maintaining a whole school mental health and social inclusion program.

(e) examine what other legislative or policy reforms may be required to address discrimination and bullying in regard to students and staff;

The AASW's position is that Tasmanian schools should be funded to employ school social workers at a ratio of 1 social worker to every 500 students.

The Productivity Commission concurs with this position. In its report "The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health", it has highlighted the important role that schools play in ensuring the mental health of young people.¹² In 40% of instances of young people having treatment for mental health disorders, their schools had been the first organisation to identify the young person's needs and respond.¹³

It recommended that social workers be employed within schools as a central method of improving the mental health of young people. This was based on the fact that school social workers can work at every level of the school organisation: from school-wide prevention programs to individualized counselling. Further, they can deliver services at every level of intensity: from light touch health literacy to individualized therapies. Indeed, school wide initiatives to prevent and respond to exclusion, discrimination and bullying are clear examples of the flexibility and depth of the role of a school social worker. An example of this approach in practice is included as Appendix A.

¹¹ (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2023)

¹² (Productivity Commission, 2020)

¹³ *ibid*

Conclusion

There is a clear expectation from the community that schools should enhance student's emotional and social development, as an integral element in the child's preparation for life. The AASW endorses school social workers as the key profession to lead this work in schools and recommends that social workers be employed throughout schools. The AASW would be happy to collaborate with the Tasmanian government to implement such a scheme.

Bibliography

- Australian Association of Social workers. (2022). *Submission to the Evaluation of the National Chaplaincy Program*.
- Australian Education Union. (2023). *ForEveryChild*. Retrieved from Investing in Australia's Future: foreverychild.au
- Australian Government Department of Education. (2024, June 13). *The National Student Wellbeing Program*. Retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.au/national-student-wellbeing-program-nswp>
- National Student Wellbeing Program*. (2021, December 31). Retrieved from NSW Federation funding agreement - Education and skills : <https://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/sites/federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/files/2023-02/National%20Student%20Wellbeing%20Program%20-%20All%20states.pdf>
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1989, November 20). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved June 1, 2023, from United Nations Human Rights: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- Productivity Commission. (2020). *The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health*. Australian Government.
- Tasmanian Government. (2023, September 21). *Keeping children safe against discrimination, bullying and harassment*. Retrieved from Department for Education, Children and Young People: <https://www.decyp.tas.gov.au/wellbeing/positive-behaviour/staying-safe/>
- Tasmanian Government: Department for Education, Children and Young people. (2024, February). *Behaviour Standards and Code of Conduct for Chaplains and Student Wellbeing Officers in Tasmanian State Schools*. Retrieved from <https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/library/Document%20Centre/Behaviour-Standards-and-Code-of-Conduct-for-Chaplains-and-Student-Wellbeing-Services-in-Tasmanian-Government-Schools.pdf>
- Testa, D. (2023). Interprofessional Collaboration: How Social Workers, Psychologists and Teachers Collaborate to Address Student Wellbeing. *Australian Social Work*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0312407X.2023.2256703#abstract>.

Appendix A: Case study of an AASW Accredited School Social Worker

THE ROLE OF A SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER IN ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING A WHOLE-SCHOOL STUDENT WELL BEING SYSTEM

As a school social worker and the Team Leader for Counselling and Well-Being Services in a large secondary school, I consider my team of 3 social workers and two psychologists to be school mental health professionals. As Team Leader, I have set about implementing multi-tiered systems of support for students and the school community as a whole.

Tier 1 is primary prevention, a platform of providing universal services to all students to increase social emotional learning. At this level social work staff in particular support programs such as restorative justice, whole class solution-focused teacher coaching, cross-age mentor programs, year 7 camp activities, parent networks for young people with autism, VCE and Year 8/9 exam stress seminars, mental health awareness raising and stigma reducing through a school webpage, addressing Tutor Groups and having invited speakers come and talk. At this level, we also provide training for staff around mental health issues. Research indicates that these interventions help between 80 – 90% of students

Tier 2 is selective intervention/early intervention where we target students who are at risk of developing mental health problems, which may be barriers to their learning: such as secondary consultations with teachers, mindfulness, 'My Youth Friends' anxiety prevention program, brief casework/counselling, social skills groups. Research indicates that this helps between 15-20% of students.

Tier 3 is our tertiary, indicated and intensive intervention with a relatively smaller population of students who are presenting with mental health problems which impact their learning and wellbeing. At this level, individual and group counselling is offered, referrals to external services such as Headspace and CAMHS and occasionally, brief family work. Research indicates that between 1-5% of students will require this level of service

At our school, all counselling and Well-Being staff are aligned with one of four Houses, each comprising around 400 students.

I have recently worked as a Professional Practice Leader in the Department of Education. I was aware that many schools in the region had only teachers in wellbeing positions. These staff had little capacity to deal with the complexities of student's lives, resorted to external referrals a lot of the time, contracted in private practitioners (mainly psychologists) who had no real linkage to the school and did not work systemically. Most have no training or experience in working with families. Psychologists who lead well-being teams may have a focus on individual psychopathology and direct services. They too, generally do not have a systemic orientation to their work and often do not interact much with families. Further, the employment of social workers as well-being leaders provides the school with a bio-psycho-social and ecological lens, through which all student's mental health can be enhanced.

Schools are an ideal place for all students to receive school-based mental health services at a universal, early intervention or more intensive level. By providing prevention and early intervention services, we have normalised our role in the school and so, have seen a significant increase in self-referrals by students over the last three years.

Submitted by a member, 2019

[REDACTED]

{insert new page here, before back cover}



© Australian Association of Social Workers

Melbourne office

Level 7, 14-20 Blackwood St

NORTH MELBOURNE 3051

PO Box 2008

Royal Melbourne Hospital VIC 3050

ACN 008 576 010

ABN 93 008 576 010

T: 03 9320 1000

W: www.aasw.asn.au

For general enquiries please contact:
social.policy@aasw.asn.au

For enquiries relating to this submission
please contact:

Angela Scarfe | Senior Policy Advisor



AASW

.....
Australian Association
of Social Workers