ACT Auditor-General's Office

Performance Audit Report

Student Support Services for Public High Schools

Report No. 2 / 2010

Department of Education and Training

May 2010

ACT AUDITOR-GENERAL'S OFFICE

PA 09/09

The Speaker
ACT Legislative Assembly
Civic Square, London Circuit
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Mr Speaker

I am pleased to forward to you a Performance Audit Report titled '**Student Support Services for Public High Schools'**, for tabling in the Legislative Assembly, pursuant to Section 17(5) of the *Auditor-General Act 1996*.

Yours sincerely

Tu Pham
Auditor-General
21 May 2010

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGCA	Australian Guidance and Counselling Association
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CNT	Complex Needs Team of the Student Management Consultants.
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CYIN	Child and Youth Interagency Network
DET	Department of Education and Training
MCEECDYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs
PCC	Pastoral Care Co-ordinator
SMC	Student Management Consultant
YSW	Youth Support Worker

1. REPORT SUMMARY AND AUDIT OPINION

INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report presents the results of a performance audit of selected services provided by the Department of Education and Training (the Department) to support students with certain needs in ACT public high schools.

BACKGROUND

1.2 Inclusivity is central to public education policy in Australia. Consequently, under the ACT Government's current policies, all students, including those with high complex needs, challenging behaviours, mental ill health, or social and emotional problems are part of an inclusive public education system.

1.3 The Department's relevant framework and policies applied to student support services incorporate principles of better practice in behaviour management identified by the Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) and other forums.

1.4 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Student Support Branch (Student Support) within the Department, provides, in collaboration with schools, a wide range of support services to enhance the educational and social outcomes for students with particular needs (Appendix B). Some of these services involve selected and targeted interventions and revolve around individual learning plans for the students, intense individual strategies, and regular monitoring and review to support these students to participate positively in the school community.

1.5 The services selected for audit are listed in Table 1.1 on the following page.

Table 1.1 Student support services examined in the current audit.

Service and staffing	Activities and Objectives
Counselling and Welfare (45 full-time equivalent School Counsellors)	School counsellors provide psychological services to students that address educational, social, emotional and behavioural needs, either individually or group. They also assist parents, teachers and schools to address issues that can affect the student's educational progress and adjustment.
Pastoral Care Co-ordinators (PCCs) (17 PCCs)	The pastoral care aims to improve the overall wellbeing of students and improve their connectedness to school. Each high school has a Pastoral Care Co-ordinator who has responsibility for the design, implementation and delivery of a variety of curricula and programs in their school-based on the pastoral care needs of their student population.
Youth Support Workers (YSWs) (17 YSWs)	Youth Support Workers are placed in ACT high schools, work closely with the PCCs to assist them in supporting students and their families, provide opportunities for growth and enhance students' education and learning. YSWs activities are focusing on running groups and programs, and engaging with students, often one to one.
Student Management Consultants (12 Teachers)	Student Management Consultants work to build teacher and system capacity to support learning outcomes for students with challenging behaviours. SMCs provide direct support to class teachers.
Complex Needs Team (1 Social Worker, 3 Teachers)	The Complex Needs Team consists of Student Management Consultants, and one social worker, who specifically work with young people with high and complex needs.

Source: DET, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Student Support Branch

AUDIT OBJECTIVES

1.6 The objective of this audit is to assess the delivery of selected student support services in ACT public high schools, with a focus on support for students with challenging behaviours, learning difficulties and other needs. The audit covers the periods up to the end of the 2009 school year.

AUDIT OPINIONS

1.7 Audit acknowledges that the Department provided the services examined during this audit in a dynamic and complex environment, and the success of these services is dependent on many factors, including school culture, socio-economic background of the students, and their family circumstances.

1.8 Audit also observed Student Support staff conducting themselves in a professional and dedicated manner. Audit appreciates the co-operation and assistance provided to the audit team by the Department and school staff during the audit.

1.9 The audit opinions drawn against the audit objectives are set out below.

The Department of Education and Training, through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Student Support Branch, delivers a wide range of services to support public high schools and their students with particular needs within a sound policy framework and guidelines.

Overall, the services selected for audit were valued by school staff and have generally assisted schools in managing and supporting students with challenging behaviours and complex needs. Access to services was reasonable.

However, the Department did not have sound procedures and systems to collect and analyse relevant information on the audited services. As a result, it did not have sufficient and reliable information to effectively plan and allocate resources, to ensure the quality of services as well as to fully evaluate the effectiveness of these services.

KEY FINDINGS

1.10 The audit opinions are supported by the following findings:

Governance and policies – student support services (Chapter 2)

- The Department's framework and policies for the delivery of student support services were comprehensive and sound. They identified three types of intervention strategy for student groups. For each student group - universal, selected and targeted, behaviour management support is provided in:
  - relationships with staff, parents, the community;
  - curriculum;
  - teaching; and
  - organisation, including a positive school culture.

- Under the Department's *Safe Schools* policy, schools promulgate their own policies and procedures for student management. As a result, schools' policies and procedures were found to vary significantly in breadth and depth: some schools have detailed policies, while others do not. There was inadequate departmental monitoring of compliance with the S*afe Schools* policy, leading to risks of some schools not implementing policies as intended.

- Suspension and incident data showed that high school students have experienced above average rates of suspensions compared to other school sectors. There was no evidence that any higher need for support to high schools was properly analysed for appropriate actions.

- The schools did not always comply with a number of requirements under the school-based management arrangements. For example, most schools did not meet the requirement to publish their School Plans on their websites, and to report against the goals in their plans, including any welfare and pastoral care goals for students.

- There was no evidence that the Department had followed-up with non-compliant schools in a timely manner. The lack of compliance reduces accountability of schools to key stakeholders.

- Student support staff operated without the guidance of updated documents on key priorities, activities, and outcomes that are specific and relevant to their services. For example, the *2010 Business Plan* for Student Support, supposed to be implemented for the 2010 school year, is yet to be finalised as at April 2010.

School counsellors (Chapter 3)

- The Department's school counsellors (psychologists) provide psychological services to students that address educational, social, emotional and behavioural needs, either individually or in groups. The Department did not systematically identify risks associated with the services and develop strategies to mitigate them.

- Professional supervision of intern psychologists adhered to time and structure requirements.

- Supervision of unconditionally registered counsellors was less formal and not subject to any reporting requirement. Given the risks in making clinical decisions that impact on a young and vulnerable client group, quality clinical supervision is vital to maintaining the competence and effectiveness of school counsellors. The inadequate professional supervision can affect the quality of the counselling services provided to school students, teachers and parents.

- The Department did not formally monitor the on-going registration status of its school counsellors, although the ACT Psychologists Board has this service available online. This could lead to risks of the Department employing unregistered and unskilled counsellors with potential adverse consequences.

- Since 2008, the Department has recruited psychologists without teaching qualifications for school counsellor positions to address resource shortfalls. However, the merits of this alternative employment pathway have not yet been formally reviewed by the Department as planned in the trial of the scheme in 2008. Also, the new approach has not yet been reflected in the Department's policies and its public website.

- The current method of allocating counsellors' days to schools was based on school population rather than needs, and therefore did not consider 'soft factors' such as the school culture, and the socio-economic background of the community from which the school draws its students. It also did not sufficiently provide for relief or replacement if counsellors took unplanned leave, or allowance for response to major incidents or crises.

- There was sufficient guidance provided to counsellors on assessing eligibility for the Special Education Program; however, this was not the case for the assessment of students with an intellectual disability.

- Services by counsellors often ended at the referral-out point. Follow-ups with the student, carers or service providers depend on the counsellor's personal practice. Therefore, there was no information available on whether the referral was successful or the student's needs have been met. Such information is required to review decisions and improve coordination of student services.

- The Department's current collection of data provides insufficient evidence for planning the delivery and funding of an effective and integrated counselling service. The Department also did not systematically analyse the information obtained from counsellors' annual reports for service improvement.

- The Department surveyed schools for the first time on the effectiveness of school counsellors in 2009, but had not yet surveyed students, the major group of clients of the service, on their satisfaction with it.

Pastoral Care Co-ordinators and Youth Support Workers (Chapter 4)

- There was extensive use of external community support services to deliver pastoral care services.

- Many Pastoral Care Co-ordinators (PCCs) did not conduct evaluation of external services as required by the departmental guidelines, including the requirement to seek student views, and for results of previous evaluations to be used in selecting future programs.

- Pastoral Care Co-ordinators worked closely with Youth Support Workers (YSWs), and assisted in their professional development. However, most YSWs did not have a professional development plan, as required.

- There was little evidence that YSWs used the detailed program plans, or the priorities plan template as specified in the departmental Practice Framework to assist in planning and delivering their services.

Student Management Consultants (SMCs) and Complex Needs Team (CNT) (Chapter 5)

- The use of Student Management Consultants (SMCs) is part of the overall strategy to build capacity to support students with challenging behaviours in their home school, focussing on direct support to classroom teachers.

- In 2009, schools referred 128 students to the SMCs and 79 students to the Complex Needs Team (CNT). However, these numbers were not complete and did not include continuing cases.

- The Department does not have an easily accessible and reliable database of information of requests or referrals of students to the SMCs and CNT, to assist planning, management and evaluation of the effectiveness of the services. In particular:

  - there was a significant disparity in referral numbers data kept by the CNT and the Department. The lack of accurate referral data can lead to problems of allocating the workload and managing responses to schools;
  - there was no reliable data on the total number of students currently receiving SMC services; and
  - the Department advised that new processes have been put in place in 2010.

- The SMCs' Business Plan includes some performance information, but is not adequate for assessing whether the SMCs are efficiently and effectively supporting schools in managing student behaviours.

- Schools valued the support provided by the SMC team, but were not always confident that SMCs were effective in bringing about significant and positive changes to student behaviours.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

1.11 The Audit made eleven recommendations to address the audit findings detailed in this report.

1.12 In accordance with section 18 of the *Auditor-General Act 1996*, a final draft of this report was provided to the Chief Executive of the Department of Education and Training for consideration and comments.

1.13 The Chief Executive provided responses to each recommendation, as shown below.

Recommendation 1 (Chapter 2)

The Department, in consultation with schools, should develop and implement a set of performance indicators for student support services, including counselling, pastoral care, student management consultants, which are measurable and useful for performance management and service improvements.

Department's response

***Agree**. The Department is currently enhancing its existing student support services' performance indicators to align with the Department's new Strategic Plan (2010-2013) and the 2010-2011 Student Support Services Branch Business Plan.*

Recommendation 2 (Chapter 2)

The Department should review the effectiveness of current school disciplinary policies against intended outcomes.

Department's response

***Partially agree**. A review of the safe school suite of policies, including the disciplinary policies was conducted as part of an internal audit conducted in 2009. The safe school audit tested the compliance to policies across 28 schools. The small amount of schools deemed non compliant have been working with the respective School Network Leaders to update the school based procedures to ensure compliance to the suite of Departmental policies, including 'disciplinary' policies. The Department will review the effectiveness of the suite of policies including disciplinary policies as part of the standard policy review cycle.*

Recommendation 3 (Chapter 2)

The Department should:

a) determine the needs of school staff for information on external services; and

b) develop a strategy to increase school awareness of available information, and assist schools in using available information to better access external services related to student support.

Department's response

***Agree**. The Department already regularly communicates the availability of external information and sources of support to schools. The Department will improve its communication strategy to ensure schools have access to relevant government and community information to support students and families.*

Recommendation 4 (Chapter 3)

The Department should systematically identify risks associated with the delivery of the school counsellors' services, thus allowing appropriate mitigation strategies to be developed, implemented and monitored.

Department's response

***Agree**. Currently the Student Support Section undertakes risk management planning on an annual basis through the Departmental business planning process. The Section will include a specific risk management assessment for the delivery of school counselling services.*

Recommendation 5 (Chapter 3)

The Department should closely monitor the provision and quality of professional supervision for school counsellors, including the maintenance of good records of professional supervision, and implementation of better practices in counselling services.

Department's response

Agree. *Senior Management currently monitors provision and quality of school counsellors' practices against Australian professional counselling and psychology standards. The Department ensures that counsellors receive the necessary clinical supervision and support required. Improvements to record keeping will be made through continuous business improvement and better practice.*

Recommendation 6 (Chapter 3)

The Department should update its recruitment policy and the public website to reflect the second pathway to employ psychologists without teaching qualifications.

Department's response

Agree. *The website and recruitment documents have already been updated to reflect the pathway to employ psychologists without teaching qualifications.*

Recommendation 7 (Chapter 3)

The Department should proceed with its planned review of the mechanism by which counsellor time is allocated to schools. In addition to the current considered factors, the assessment of need for counselling services should have regard to:

a) a measure of socio-economic disadvantage;

b) data collected in the counsellors' annual reports; and

c) feedback from schools and counsellors.

Department's response

a) ***Partially agree.*** *A measure of socio-economic disadvantage is not a suitable or sufficient measure in the ACT environment. A number of other factors are collated to assess the need for counselling services.*

b) ***Agree***. *This data collected can be used to enhance the assessment of need.*

c) ***Agree***. *Principals, School Network Leaders and Senior Counsellors will better identify local needs and make decisions to deploy counsellor resources accordingly.*

Recommendation 8 (Chapter 3)

The Department should:

a) systematically collect and analyse data on performance measurements of counselling services to provide sufficient evidence for planning the delivery of an effective and integrated service; and

b) obtain feedback from students in determining whether the counselling service was useful or effective in addressing their concerns.

Department's response

a) ***Agree****. As acknowledged to the Audit Team the Student Support Practice Standards (2009) have been developed and are being implemented in 2010.*

b) ***Partially agree****. The role of the school counsellor is to support the education of young people by addressing their issues. Feedback about the effectiveness of the school counsellors' role is measured through school staff feedback and engagement of young persons in their education and not by direct feedback from the student.*

Recommendation 9 (Chapter 4)

The Department should:

a) ensure that schools evaluate pastoral care and community-based services from external providers and report results to the Department, and

b) compile and disseminate this information to assist schools in better selecting and using these externally-sourced services.

Department's response

Agree*. The Department is working with Pastoral Care Co-ordinators to develop a template for evaluating external programs. Pastoral Care Co-ordinators will disseminate this information in their network meetings.*

Recommendation 10 (Chapter 4)

To enhance the capacity of Pastoral Care Co-ordinators and Youth Support Workers to support students, the Department should ensure that:

a) each Youth Support Worker has a professional learning plan in place;

b) Youth Support Workers' programs are documented and evaluated; and

c) the Pastoral Care Co-ordinators and Youth Support Workers are provided with record management training appropriate to their roles.

Department's response

*a) **Agree**. The Department already undertakes this activity and will continuously work with school principals to enhance the quality of learning plans of Youth Support Workers.*

*b) **Agree**. The Department will support the Pastoral Care Coordinators to develop a process to document, evaluate and share programs delivered by the Youth Support Workers.*

*c) **Agree**. Pastoral Care Coordinators and Youth Support Workers will undertake records management training.*

Recommendation 11 (Chapter 5)

The Department should:

a) redesign its referral database to allow for accurate and complete records of the numbers and details of referrals to, and services by, Student Management Consultants and Complex Needs Team;

b) develop clear performance measures for Student Management Consultants and Complex Needs Team services; and

c) evaluate the effectiveness of Student Management Consultants and Complex Needs Team services.

Department's response

*a) **Agree**. The referral database will be re-developed to ensure records are accurate, complete and used for planning.*

*b) **Agree**. Performance measures are being strengthened from the development of the Student Support Practice Standards and are being implemented in 2010.*

*c) **Agree.** The performance measures developed from the Standards will include measures of effectiveness that will support the evaluation of Student Management Consultants and the Complex Needs Team.*

2. GOVERNANCE AND POLICIES - STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

INTRODUCTION

2.1 This chapter outlines governance arrangements and key policies in relation to the student support services in ACT public high schools.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Department's framework and policies for the delivery of student support services were comprehensive and sound. They identified three types of intervention strategy for student groups. For each student group - universal, selected and targeted, behaviour management support is provided in:
  - relationships with staff, parents, the community;
  - curriculum;
  - teaching; and
  - organisation, including a positive school culture.
- Under the Department's *Safe Schools* policy, schools promulgate their own policies and procedures for student management. As a result, schools' policies and procedures were found to vary significantly in breadth and depth: some schools have detailed policies, while others do not. There was inadequate departmental monitoring of compliance with the S*afe Schools* policy, leading to risks of some schools not implementing policies as intended.
- Suspension and incident data showed that high school students have experienced above average rates of suspensions compared to other school sectors. There was no evidence that any higher need for support to high schools was properly analysed for appropriate actions.
- The schools did not always comply with a number of requirements under the school-based management arrangements. For example, most schools did not meet the requirement to publish their School Plans on their websites, and to report against the goals in their plans, including any welfare and pastoral care goals for students.

- There was no evidence that the Department had followed-up with non-compliant schools in a timely manner. The lack of compliance reduces accountability of schools to key stakeholders.

- Student support staff operated without the guidance of updated documents on key priorities, activities, and outcomes that are specific and relevant to their services. For example, the *2010 Business Plan* for Student Support, supposed to be implemented for the 2010 school year, is yet to be finalised as at April 2010.

GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS

2.2 The Department of Education and Training (the Department) is responsible for managing and overseeing the overall delivery of a range of student support services across ACT public schools.[1] Under school-based management, the principals of schools are responsible for the delivery of most services to students requiring support.

2.3 The Department has established a wide range of plans, policies, and processes to oversight, monitor and provide guidance for the delivery of services. These include:

- the *Strategic Plan 2010-13* ;
- the draft *Student Wellbeing and Behaviour Support Business Plan 2010*;
- the *Risk Management and Audit Plan 2008-09*
- the *Student Support Service Delivery Model*;
- *Protocols for Student Management;*
- a range of surveys on school-based staff attitudes about student support services;
- a range of policies, as found on the Department's website:
  - Countering Bullying, Harassment and Violence in ACT Public Schools;
  - Child Abuse and Neglect;
  - Complaints Resolution Policy;
  - Countering Sexual Harassment in ACT Public Schools;

[1] The Department's *Student Services Practice Framework 2008* states: '…through our services we will work in collaboration with schools to enhance the educational and social outcomes for children and young people with high and complex needs, challenging behaviours, mental ill health, social and emotional problems and for some students with disabilities.'

  - Suspension, and Exclusion or Transfer of Students in ACT Public Schools (Transitional Policy);
- the *Stage 3 Referrals database*; and
- the *Critical Incidents database*.

2.4 The above policies and information were comprehensive and aimed to provide overall directions to schools, with schools themselves also able to adopt and develop these policies as appropriate to suit their own specific needs and circumstances.

Legislation

2.5 School education – government and non-government – is regulated by the *Education Act 2004*. The Act makes provisions for all aspects of school administration, enrolment and attendance.

2.6 Other legislation also affects high school education, such as the *Children and Young People Act 2008*. This Act deals with juvenile justice, and at section 176 puts the onus on the chief executive administering the Act to supply education to young detainees.

Strategic and business planning

2.7 The strategic directions of ACT educational outcomes are articulated in the Department's *Strategic Plan 2010-13*. The Plan sets out for a vision, and associated values that are applied in the areas of:

- learning and teaching;
- school environment;
- student pathways; and
- leadership and corporate development.

2.8 Each of these areas has priorities and performance measures. They are not specific to programs delivered by Student Support. Instead, the plan is structured to provide a broad framework for delivery of all departmental outputs.

2.9 At the time of audit (April 2010), the *Business Plan 2010* for Student Support was not finalised. It would be desirable for these plans to be finalised before or soon after the commencement of the school year, to ensure its timely implementation, especially when new or significant policies need to be disseminated and implemented by and within schools.

2.10 The priorities of the *Student Services (Student Support) Business Plan 2009*, which has not yet been replaced, were aligned to the Department's previous

Strategic Plan 2006-09, but were not linked to the specific programs delivered by Student Support. This linkage is important to ensure that the line of accountability for the delivery of the programs to and within schools is clear and that the programs have stated objectives and can be evaluated against their contributions to achieving the Department's outcomes.

Performance management

2.11 The Department has established a range of performance indicators aiming to measure the performance of student support services. These indicators are set down in the *Student Services (Student Support) Business Plan 2009*, against the Department's stated strategic goals and priorities. As previously mentioned, Student Support's business plan for 2010 is currently being finalised.

2.12 These indicators provide limited information for management to assess performance of the student support services as they mainly described activities and strategies rather than outputs, outcomes and targets. For example, the *Student Services (Student Support) Business Plan 2009* includes an indicator under Strategic Goal 1 (provide high quality education and training to meet the needs of the 21st century) which states '*roles of student services staff responsive to advice from principal reference group and inter agency partners*'.

2.13 In short, the current indicators for student support services were not well defined with appropriate outputs and targets. Therefore, it was not clear how performance is measured and which information would be collected and analysed for this purpose.

Recommendation 1

The Department, in consultation with schools, should develop and implement a set of performance indicators for student support services, including counselling, pastoral care, student management consultants, which are measurable and useful for performance management and service improvements.

Risk management

2.14 The Department's current departmental risk management plan is the *Risk Management and Audit Plan 2008-09.* The Plan sets down methods by which strategic risks are identified, monitored and reviewed across the Department. These risks are grouped according to 'Issue/Activity' such as Capital Works Program, Attraction and Retention of Staff, Safe Schools, and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Agenda.

2.15 There is no separate risk management plan to manage the operational risks associated with the delivery of student support services programs. Instead,

the *Student Services (Student Support) Business Plan 2009* contains a risk ranking against stated priorities and actions without identifying what the operational risks are and how to mitigate them.

2.16 The Department's operational risk management process would be strengthened by addressing in an explicit way the key operational risks to achievement of student support services outcomes, and strategies to address those risks including necessary resource allocation.

THE DEPARTMENT'S POLICIES FOR STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

2.17 In 2004, the Council of Australian Governments' Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) reported on its *Student Behaviour Management Project*. The project identified seven core principles of behaviour management, and these principles are emphasised in the Department's Student Management Protocols disseminated to schools.

Student behaviour:

- needs to be understood in the context of the range of relationships and interactions, and their effect on students (principle 1); and
- is inextricably linked to the quality of the learning experience (principle 5).

Student behaviour management and practices:

- must embrace a health promoting approach to creating a safe, supportive and caring environment (principle 2);
- must embrace inclusiveness, which caters for different potentials, needs and resources of all students (principle 3); and
- should incorporate a student-centred philosophy that places the student at the centre of education … and focuses on the whole student … (principle 4).

Positive relationships, particularly between student and teacher, are critical for maximising appropriate behaviour and achieving learning outcomes. (principle 6)

Effective student behaviour change and management is enhanced through internally based school support structures, and externally based family, education department, community and interagency partnerships (principle 7).

2.18 In addition to these principles, the MCEECDYA identified good practices in behaviour management. One such practice was a 'clearly articulated and comprehensive behaviour management policy at a system, district/community, school, and classroom level'.

2.19 The Department's *Student Support Service Delivery Model* is the overarching policy document that sets down the framework for student support services. The framework groups support programs according to levels of students' need - universal, selected and targeted interventions.

2.20 Features of the model are as follows.

- Categorisation of interventions:
  - Universal interventions. These are basic strategies used across the whole school. No additional support is needed for an estimated 75 to 85 per cent of the school population. Examples are quality teaching, well- being programs and consultation with families, school staff and outside providers;
  - Selected interventions are more intense, tailored classroom and small group strategies. Some ten to twenty per cent of students need both universal and selected strategies. These revolve around individual learning plans and regular monitoring and review;
  - Targeted interventions are intense individual strategies to support students to participate positively in the school community. About three to five per cent of students require this level of support.
- Areas to be considered and managed by schools with Student Service's assistance are:
  - the organisation, values and beliefs of the school and class, and the way that lessons are taught;
  - relationships inside and outside school; and
  - curriculum, which is planned, guided and implemented by schools.

2.21 The Department advised that the student support services focussed on the behaviour support. There are aspects in each of the three areas listed above for which Student Support does not have expertise to support schools.

2.22 For each of the strategies provided to universal, selected and targeted student groups, behaviour management support is provided in:

- relationships with staff, parents, the community;
- curriculum;
- teaching; and
- organisation, including a positive school culture.

2.23 Under the Department's *Safe Schools* policy, schools promulgate their own policies and procedures for student management. The Departmental

guidelines are not specific as to what policies and procedures schools should cover, and therefore schools' policies vary in breadth and depth; some schools have a variety of detailed policies, others do not.

2.24 While schools need to be able to adapt their own policies and procedures to local conditions, Departmental guidance should define the expected coverage of subject matter for schools to assist consistency in the development of policy documents across schools. The Department advised that guidelines to recommend options to schools are being developed.

School-based management

2.25 Under the school-based management framework, each principal is responsible to the Chief Executive for the management of the school and its education program. Principals perform their duties in accordance with government priorities and departmental policies and instructions, and any directions issued by the Chief Executive.

2.26 The *School Management Manual* is published on the Department's intranet site. It contains tools for principals to assist with school-based management. One such tool is a detailed checklist of all principals' responsibilities for school management.

2.27 The Manual requires the production of a School Plan, and that the Plan to reside on the school's website. The Manual requires schools to:

- set objectives, and record progress towards the objectives in an annual self-assessment that is reported through the annual school board report;
- define system-identified and school-identified priorities and targets within the domains of school improvement, in the context of its own community and the public school system;
- produce an annual operating plan designed to lay out a framework for action and the delivery of measured outcomes; and
- measure, monitor and report on priorities in the four domains of school improvement; learning and teaching, leading and managing, student environment and community involvement.

2.28 Student welfare and pastoral care objectives and progress, amongst other things, would be included in the School Plan. Plans are required to be placed on school websites. Schools are to report against the goals in their plans, including any welfare and pastoral care goals, in the annual School Board reports, in a standard format.

2.29 Audit found that most schools did not meet the requirements to publish their School Plans on their websites. Further, there was no evidence that the Department had followed-up with non-compliant schools. As a School Plan

is a key accountability document, the lack of compliance significantly reduces accountability of schools to key stakeholders.

2.30 School-based management was reviewed in 2004. A further review of school-based management is underway, and was due to report in December 2009, but was not available at the time of audit.

Inclusiveness and *Safe Schools* policy

2.31 ACT and Commonwealth Government legislation and ACT Government policy call on public high schools to be inclusive:

- sub-section 18.a of the *Education Act 2004* states that the ACT government school system is based on the principles of equity, universality and non-discrimination;
- the Commonwealth's *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, sub-section 3(a) aims 'to eliminate, as far as possible, discrimination against persons on the ground of disability in the areas of … education …';
- the *Canberra Social Plan* aims for diversity and equality of access to education; and
- the Department's *Strategic Plan* adopts inclusivity as one of its values for public education.

2.32 The MCEECDYA's *Melbourne Declaration on the Education Goals of Young Australians* commits to promoting equity in education and freedom from various forms of discrimination.

2.33 The Department issued a discussion paper on inclusivity in 2002. Although the Department has not articulated a policy on inclusivity and its intended outcomes to communicate to all stakeholders, inclusivity principle is incorporated and reflected in a wide range of government policies and practices.

2.34 In brief, inclusivity is central to public policy, and to public education. The Department's view that all students, including those with challenging behaviours, should be part of an inclusive public education system accorded with the principles of best practice in behaviour management identified by MCEECDYA, and other forums. This policy is fundamental to, and has significant impacts on the development and delivery of the services to support students with complex behaviour issues to stay in schools.

School discipline

2.35 The Commonwealth Government's *Parents' Attitude to Schooling* survey found that 86 per cent of parents regarded discipline as an important factor in choosing a school.

2.36 The Department's *Providing Safe Schools P-12* policy, issued in 2007, requires schools to develop school procedures, in consultation with students, parents and carers, which aim to promote a safe and supportive learning environment. Principals should 'develop a whole school approach and commitment to the provision of a safe and supportive environment [and] foster positive practices that contribute to a sense of well-being and safety for staff and students'.

2.37 An internal audit of the policy in July 2009 recommended that schools report on actions they have taken in compliance with the policy. Where schools did not wholly comply with the policy (35 per cent of all schools, based on a sample), the report recommended action to raise compliance, and to recognise better practice. The Department has agreed to these recommendations.

2.38 The *Education Act 2004* provides for suspension or exclusion as sanctions for persistently and wilful noncompliance, violence or threats of violence, or behaviour that is disruptive to safety, wellbeing or good order at the school.

2.39 Under Section 36, a delegate of the Chief Executive of the Department, usually a principal, may suspend a student for up to 15 school days. The Chief Executive may hand down longer periods of suspension.

2.40 Violence or threats of violence are 'critical incidents', and data on them is collated by the Department in a database. The Department extracts and analyses information on critical incidents from the database through spreadsheets. This data showed that, for 2009, 25 of the total 38 critical incidents occurred in high schools. Of these, 15 incidents involved violence (actual and potential) and theft.

2.41 The Department advised Audit that it is currently reviewing the management of suspensions. A new transitional policy on suspensions was issued in early 2010.

2.42 Table 2.1 shows suspensions data for the entire public school sector, and compares these with those of high schools in particular.

Table 2.1 Suspension data - 2009 (of all ACT public schools, and public high schools)

	All schools	High schools
Enrolments (% in high schools)	38 280	25%
Incidents[2] in 2009 (% in high schools)	1 327	74%
Total days students suspended in 2009 (% in high schools)	2 532	75%
Total days students suspended in 2009 as a percentage of the total number of days at school (Number of students times days in the school year (193))	0.034%	0.103%
Median incidents per school in 2009	8.5	54
Average total incidents per school	21.40	57.47
Median total days suspension per school	13	93
Average total days suspension per school	40.84	112.40
Length of suspension – median	1.69	1.98
Length of suspension – average	1.71	1.92

Source: DET, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Student Support Branch

2.43 This data shows that numbers of school days lost through suspension are a very small proportion of the total days attendance at school by all students. The loss for high school students is equivalent to about one day per 1 000 days attendance by students, or, for every five students, one day's suspension for one student over the entire year.

2.44 Table 2.1 also shows that in 2009, high school students accounted for the great majority, about 75 per cent, of suspension incidents and days lost, although they were only 25 per cent of the total school population.

2.45 The difference between the median and average total days per school indicates that one or more high schools had a very large numbers of incidents, and days lost. Compared to the primary and senior secondary systems, high schools have higher needs for support services to address factors affecting student behaviours and the higher rate of suspension or exclusion.

2.46 Some schools advised Audit that the need for intense individual strategies to support students in the targeted group, the three to five per cent of the school

[2] The Department gathers data on the type of incident. Incidents such as damage to property and assault are treated as security incidents.

population, was a strain on staff's physical resources and emotional well-being.

2.47 Under the current school-based management framework, each school is responsible for its disciplinary practices. At the time of the audit, Audit was not aware of any review by the Department on the implementation and the effectiveness or otherwise of the current disciplinary approach, including suspension.

2.48 While acknowledging the complexity of the circumstances leading to critical incidents at schools and disciplinary actions by schools, Audit considers that a review on the implementation and effectiveness of ACT school disciplinary policy could assess the relative merits of alternative approaches, or identify better practices in some schools to be shared with others, to better achieve the intended outcomes.

Recommendation 2

The Department should review the effectiveness of current school disciplinary policies against intended outcomes.

Access to external services for student support

2.49 In additional to programs delivered by the Department and schools, school staff can access a wide range of external services to provide additional support to students. These include, for example, occupational training providers, community and family services, and services provided by other ACT and Commonwealth Government agencies.

2.50 Information on the external services available is essential to facilitate access to those services. Also, this information is essential to schools when planning and co-ordinating service delivery to students.

2.51 Student Support provides information to schools via school counsellors, Youth Support Workers and Pastor Care Co-ordinators, and there are several sources of information in the community and government sectors.

2.52 A number of schools advised Audit that the Department encouraged school access to external services, and that access could be improved with well co-ordinated information on services available from a central source such as Student Services, and with advice or feedback from other schools that have used similar services.

2.53 The Department sponsors the Children and Youth Interagency Network (CYIN), a forum of other ACT agencies that seeks to promote co-ordinated responses to the needs of some students with complex needs.

2.54 The Department issued the results of a survey of CYIN in October 2009. Respondents to the survey came from all school sectors, and from other areas of the Department. Nineteen of the 46 respondents were from schools – eight from high schools.

2.55 The results of the survey were generally satisfactory, although in the context of the low number of responses (46), a significant number (21) rated CYIN as 'poor' or 'fair' in effectively co-ordinating agencies. Comments by respondents also indicated that CYIN could be more effective in co-ordinating and providing support for complex needs students, and could react in a more timely manner.

2.56 In conclusion, although a number of summary of services have been published, school staff often found access to external services difficult, possibly reflecting the lack of awareness by school staff of available information, and the lack of readily and centrally co-ordinated information on external services.

2.57 The Department should consider more effective ways to communicate to school staff current sources of information and how best to access them.

Recommendation 3

The Department should:

a) determine the needs of school staff for information on external services; and

b) develop a strategy to increase school awareness of available information, and assist schools in using available information to better access external services related to student support.

3. SCHOOL COUNSELLORS

INTRODUCTION

3.1 This chapter considers the operations of the school counsellors services in ACT public high schools, in particular how these services are planned, managed, delivered and monitored to ensure they meet the clients' needs.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Department's school counsellors (psychologists) provide psychological services to students that address educational, social, emotional and behavioural needs, either individually or in groups. The Department did not systematically identify risks associated with the services and develop strategies to mitigate them.
- Professional supervision of intern psychologists adhered to time and structure requirements.
- Supervision of unconditionally registered counsellors was less formal and not subject to any reporting requirement. Given the risks in making clinical decisions that impact on a young and vulnerable client group, quality clinical supervision is vital to maintaining the competence and effectiveness of school counsellors. The inadequate professional supervision can affect the quality of the counselling services provided to school students, teachers and parents.
- The Department did not formally monitor the on-going registration status of its school counsellors, although the ACT Psychologists Board has this service available online. This could lead to risks of the Department employing unregistered and unskilled counsellors with potential adverse consequences
- Since 2008, the Department has recruited psychologists without teaching qualifications for school counsellor positions to address resource shortfalls. However, the merits of this alternative employment pathway have not yet been formally reviewed by the Department as planned in the trial of the scheme in 2008. Also, the new approach has not yet been reflected in the Department's policies and its public website.

- The current method of allocating counsellors' days to schools was based on school population rather than needs, and therefore did not consider 'soft factors' such as the school culture, and the socio-economic background of the community from which the school draws its students. It also did not sufficiently provide for relief or replacement if counsellors took unplanned leave, or allowance for response to major incidents or crises.
- There was sufficient guidance provided to counsellors on assessing eligibility for the Special Education Program; however, this was not the case for the assessment of students with an intellectual disability.
- Services by counsellors often ended at the referral-out point. Follow-ups with the student, carers or service providers depend on the counsellor's personal practice. Therefore, there was no information available on whether the referral was successful or the student's needs have been met. Such information is required to review decisions and improve coordination of student services.
- The Department's current collection of data provides insufficient evidence for planning the delivery and funding of an effective and integrated counselling service. The Department also did not systematically analyse the information obtained from counsellors' annual reports for service improvement.
- The Department surveyed schools for the first time on the effectiveness of school counsellors in 2009, but had not yet surveyed students, the major group of clients of the service, on their satisfaction with it.

BACKGROUND

3.2 At some time during their school years, some young people experience difficulties in their homes or within the school environment. These problems can significantly affect a student's learning, their social or emotional well-being. In this context, school counsellors are seen as the most visible and accessible professional help available, and also a critical first point for intervention and prevention for those students.[3]

3.3 Professional help from school counsellors is available in every ACT public high school. Counsellors, either on a part-time or full-time basis, 'provide appropriate psychological services to students that address educational, social, emotional and behavioural needs, either individually or group'.

[3] Offer et al, 'To Whom Do Adolescents Turn for Help? Differences between Disturbed and Non-disturbed Adolescents', *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry,* July 1991, Volume 30, Issue 4, pages 623-630.

3.4 According to the Department's website, the Department's school counsellors have a range of skills that enable them to assist students, parents, and teachers with issues that can affect a student's educational progress and adjustment. These issues include, for example:

- learning difficulties;
- behaviour management;
- special education services;
- social skills;
- family relationships;
- grief and loss;
- personal development;
- study skills;
- protective behaviours;
- transition across sectors;
- secondary subject choice and career advice;
- tertiary course options;
- conflict resolution; and
- gifted and talented students.

GOVERNANCE

3.5 School counsellors are employed by the Department in the Student Wellbeing and Behaviour Support Section of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Student Support Branch (Student Support). They are school-based but supervised by their network Senior Counsellors. There are six Senior Counsellors responsible for overseeing counselling in the four school networks, and another Senior Counsellor responsible for the Early Years Learning Counsellors team. Senior Counsellors are supervised by an Assistant Manager of Student Wellbeing and Behaviour Support.

Legislative and practice framework

3.6 School counsellors work within the *ACT Education Act 2004*, the *ACT Health Professionals Act 2004* and other relevant legislation.

3.7 The psychologist profession is particularly regulated by *Schedule 7 – Psychologists*, of the *Health Professionals Regulation 2004*, covering registration, membership, demonstration of professional development, maintenance of continued competence, and currency of practice. Psychologists are required to comply with the standards of practice included

in the *Standards of Practice for Allied Health Professionals* (ACT Health, published in May 2005).

3.8 The ACT Psychologists Board (the Board) has developed a number of standards statements to guide practitioners on professional, legal, and ethical issues. The most recently issued standards statements instrument is the *Health Professionals (ACT Psychologists Board Standards Statements) Approval 2009 (No 1)* – May 2009. The instrument contained ten standards statements of practice required from a registered psychologist, reflecting the Board's interpretation of the *Health Professionals Act 2004*.

3.9 At the operational level, the *Student Support Services Practice Framework 2008* (the Framework) sets out the objectives and outcomes to be achieved by Student Services. In relation to school counsellors, the *Framework* states that:

> A team of school counsellors provide targeted and individual counselling to support students from preschool to college. In addition they provide proactive and preventative programs to school communities. They work collaboratively with classroom teachers, welfare teams, executive teams, parents and government and non-government agencies.

3.10 In Audit's view, this statement is clear on the activity of counsellors, but less clear on the output and outcomes to be achieved. Also, the *Framework* is not explicit on the quality standards appropriate to school counselling.

3.11 Audit noted that in early 2010, the Department developed the *Student Support Practice Standards 2010* as a guiding document for practice of Student Support staff including school counsellors.

Strategic directions

3.12 The strategic directions of school counselling services are guided by the Department's *Strategic Plan 2010-13*, which set out fifteen priorities and sixteen performance measures.

3.13 The following priorities are particularly relevant to counsellors services:

- facilitate effective student learning through safe and inclusive environments; and
- strengthen student engagement and learning outcomes by enhancing student support and intervention services.

3.14 Student Support was still in the process of finalising its *Business Plan* for 2010; therefore, Audit was unable to conclude what intentions or plans, if any, the Department has to review, maintain or improve the quality of counsellors' services to meet the demands of students and schools, and to achieve the performance measures of the Department.

3.15 Audit noted that, for many counsellors, positive outcomes are measured by the students achieving the goals set by them in the first counselling session.

3.16 Audit acknowledged that given the nature of counsellors' services, outcomes or effectiveness can be dependent on other external factors. Nevertheless, to be able to fully assess, monitor and report on the effectiveness of the services, it is desirable for the Department to set appropriate targets to ensure accountability for the delivery of quality counsellors' services to schools.

3.17 Audit was advised that, from Term 4 of 2009, counsellors were developing a document called *Strategic Directions* in the form of an action plan, identifying the two areas of focus for counsellors services being 'Students with Trauma and Attachment Needs' and 'Learning Difficulties'. Development of the document was expected to help identify activities of priority for the services, and accordingly identify targeted professional learning areas to enable counsellors to provide stronger support to schools on the areas. The document, however, is yet to be finalised.

Risk management

3.18 Although the Department had a Risk Management Plan, risks specifically associated with the counselling service were not identified. Instead, the *Student Services (Student Support) Business Plan 2009* simply marked the level of risk (by numbers) against each deliverable in the plan.

3.19 Given that counselling is a health profession, with more than 50 counsellors providing service to all the public schools in the ACT, it is desirable that risks associated to the service be recognised and addressed.

3.20 Audit identified some of the possible risks that school counsellors may be exposed to:

- inconsistent application or interpretation of eligibility criteria or test scores, such as intellectual disability criteria in determining access to services);
- poor clinical decisions due to inadequate professional supervision or peer reviews;
- inadequate assessment or therapeutic treatment due to time constraints;
- decisions not in the best interest of students due to pressure from schools (for example for target funding entitlement);
- limited capacity to respond to major incidents or crises; and
- legal and liability risks.

3.21 The Department has already recognised some of the risks. Audit noted that the Department has recently developed *Best Practice Considerations for the Assessment of Intelligence* to provide guidance on the area of intellectual disability.

Recommendation 4

The Department should systematically identify risks associated with the delivery of the school counsellors' services, thus allowing appropriate mitigation strategies to be developed, implemented and monitored.

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

3.22 In providing counselling services, counsellors are required to act in accordance with strict professional standards and code of ethics, which require confidentiality, accountability and clinical supervision.

Confidentiality

3.23 One of the professional standards strictly required of counsellors is to respect the confidentiality of their clients. Information collected during the course of service is often classified as personal or confidential information, the use of which is regulated by the (Commonwealth) *Privacy Act 1988*, the *Health Records (Privacy and Access) Act 1997* and *Freedom of Information Act 1989*.

3.24 There are, however, some specific circumstances under which counsellors may need to break confidentiality and share information without the consent of the client student. In particular, legislation requires counsellors to report if there are signs of child abuse or intentions of self- harm.[4]

3.25 In practice, most counsellors advise their client students and their carers of their rights, as well as the mandatory reporting requirements. The challenge is, as reported by some counsellors, to balance confidentiality with sharing information with school staff and the principal, who can then enlist other support for the student.

3.26 Studies have showed that if caution is not taken, breaches of confidentiality can lead to feelings of betrayal, or disillusionment in students, and may discourage students from accessing school counsellors again.[5]

[4] Department of Education and Training, *Child Abuse and Neglect – Guidelines for Schools and Preschools*.

[5] Reid W (1996) *School Counselling - A Client Centred Perspective*, Kids Help Line report, page 14

3.27 Audit noted that the *School Counselling Manual* contains very limited guidance on this matter, and there is no explicit provision in the Counsellors' Code of Ethics other than the need for obtaining parental or student consent when the information is to be released to 'other agencies'.

3.28 The Department advised that training was provided to counsellors in the area of privacy and record keeping including confidentiality obligations.

Clinical supervision

3.29 In common with other professionals who diagnose or treat clinical patients, and require professional standards, ACT school counsellors are subject to clinical supervision, known as 'professional supervision', by a senior counsellor. The purpose is to develop and maintain the counsellor's standards of competence and ethics, and to ensure client safety. Areas subject to professional supervision include assessment, counselling, therapeutic treatment, and training relating to learning, behaviour, social and emotional issues.

3.30 For conditionally registered psychologists (also known as 'intern psychologists' or 'interns') to obtain unconditional registration, the ACT Psychologists Board requires that they have 100 hours of face to face supervision over two years, equivalent to twelve and a half hours per school term. This involves two hours per fortnight or one hour weekly sessions with their supervisor, as well as preparation and recording time by both supervisor and supervisee.

3.31 The Board does not set the number of supervision hours for unconditionally registered school counsellors. However, the *Professional and Administrative Supervision of School Counsellors* document of Student Support requires unconditionally registered school counsellors to have four hours per term of 'professional supervision'.

3.32 Internally, the two key documents that govern supervision of school counsellors are the *Supervision Code Preamble* (developed in 2000) and the *Professional and Administrative Supervision of School Counsellors* document (developed in 2008).

3.33 Accordingly, a Supervision Contract must be signed by both supervisor and supervisee to agree on the format and frequency of supervision sessions. Audit noted that one of the default terms of the contract is to have at least an observed practice and a file audit during a year. Audit was advised that observed practice sessions by senior counsellors did take place; however, Audit could not verify this, as no records were available.

3.34 Audit found that professional supervision of intern psychologists adhered to time and structure requirements.

3.35 The supervision of unconditionally registered counsellors was less formal and not subject to any reporting requirement, and its frequency was significantly dependant on the senior counsellor's workload. In the absence of formal monitoring, it was unknown to management whether professional supervision of the unconditionally registered counsellors did take place as required or achieved the intended outcomes.

3.36 More often, on difficult issues, counsellors consulted their senior counsellors via emails or phone. In Audit's view, such contacts while encouraged, could not take place of 'professional supervision', as clearly stated in Student Support's *Professional and Administrative Supervision of School Counsellors* document.

3.37 In responding to Audit's questionnaire, counsellors commented that although they had confidence in their supervising senior counsellors and received support from them, the benefits of professional supervision were reduced by the limited time available to encourage reflection on recent cases, and to provide advice, feedback and assistance. Although network meetings were used as a forum for general clinical discussions, they served more as administrative and group professional discussion fora.

3.38 On average, a senior counsellor supervises between nine to eleven counsellors, two of whom are intern psychologists. To maintain their registration, senior counsellors also provide one and a half day per week of counselling service themselves. This means that they have three and a half days in a week to supervise counsellors in addition to performing other senior counsellor's duties.

3.39 Audit found there were risks that senior counsellors, when having a heavy workload, would not give a high priority to the supervision duty, and would not provide adequate time for supervision and for providing clinical advice.

3.40 Furthermore, as the Department acknowledged, clinical supervision is the main quality assurance mechanism in place to ensure the provision of high quality counselling in high schools. Given the risks in making clinical decisions that impact on a young and vulnerable client group, quality clinical supervision is vital to maintaining the competence and effectiveness of school counsellors.

3.41 If supervision is ineffective and counsellors are not monitored and encouraged, counsellors' skills development may be compromised, good practice may not be implemented, and concerns will be raised about service quality.[6]

[6] Barletta J, 1996, 'Supervision for School Counsellors: When Will We Get What We Really Need?' *Australian Journal of Guidance & Counselling,* Vol 6 No 1.

3.42 The issue has been recognised by the Student Wellbeing and Behaviour Support Section. It has recently engaged a Registered Supervisors Trainer from the NSW Psychologists Board to provide training to a number of school counsellors and senior counsellors in order to strengthen the capacity of the team to provide supervision to the interns in a wider scope.

Recommendation 5

The Department should closely monitor the provision and quality of professional supervision for school counsellors, including the maintenance of good records of professional supervision, and implementation of better practices in counselling services.

RESOURCES

Professional registrations

3.43 Schedule 7 of the *Health Professionals Act* 2004 requires that, to practice as a psychologist, an individual must have a psychology degree and two years of supervised training approved by the Psychologists Board. Conditional registration may be granted to graduates who are undertaking further education or training approved by the Board, or who are under supervision and working as a psychologist.

3.44 School counsellors are required to be registered psychologists under the Department's employment conditions. Additional teaching qualifications are preferable but are no longer a compulsory requirement.

3.45 The counselling and welfare team currently consists of 54 psychologists, of whom fourteen are conditionally registered and the remaining 40 are unconditionally registered.

3.46 Audit noted, however, that the Department has not formally monitored the ongoing registration status of its counsellors, although the ACT Psychologists Board has this service available online. The Board also advised Audit that they do not maintain a formal relationship with the Department. This may expose the counselling service to some risks such as:

- employment of unregistered persons, in particular relief or contractor counsellors; and
- continuing employment of counsellors who had been deregistered, or no longer maintain their registration.

3.47 Audit is concerned that the current lack of monitoring the registration status of school counsellors will increase risks of employing unskilled counsellors with potential adverse impacts on students and schools.

Recruitment

3.48 Before 2008, school counsellors had teaching qualifications and were eligible for registration by the ACT Psychologists Board. The dual qualifications requirement caused difficulties in attracting suitably qualified personnel – psychologists and teachers did not see any financial incentive for them to undertake more training to be employed as school counsellors.

3.49 In 2008, the Department, with the agreement of the Australian Education Union, trialled the employment of psychologists with no teaching qualifications, to address the staff shortfall. The Department planned an evaluation of the trial to measure the effectiveness of the model. Audit was advised that this evaluation did not occur since only two psychologists without teaching qualifications were appointed under the trial; and the Department obtained positive verbal feedback from the schools that shared the two psychologists.

3.50 Following the trial, from Term 4 of 2008, the Department has been recruiting psychologists without teaching qualifications to permanent positions. As a result, ten Health Professional Officers with psychology qualifications have been employed to be school counsellors under the scheme.

3.51 The Department intends to recruit more psychologists without teaching qualifications in the future. A *Staff Recruitment and Retention Strategy for School Counsellors* is being developed to address the shortage of counsellors. In light of this, Audit believes that an evaluation of the alternate recruitment approach would assure school communities that standards of counselling services are not affected.

3.52 Audit also noted that the new recruitment approach has not yet been reflected in the Department's policies and its public website. For example, the *School Teacher Qualifications* policy issued in 2009, provision 4.2.1 states that:

> the following are mandatory qualifications for employment as a school counsellor:
>
> – completion of a pre-service professional school teacher education, including components outlined in 4.1.1;[7] and
>
> – eligibility for registration with the Psychologists Board.

[7] Clause 4.1.1 of the policy provides that:

> The pre-service professional components are theoretical and practical subjects with a clear relation to initial school teacher education. These include courses in education, curriculum studies and teaching methodologies appropriate to the applicant's area of teaching expertise, education/ developmental psychology, and studies in teaching and learning.
>
> The pre-service professional components must include at least six weeks (30 days) of supervised school teaching practice.

3.53 Similarly, the Department's website, in the Guidance and Counselling Service section, refers only to the dual qualification requirement:[8]

> School counsellors are required to be registered with the ACT Psychologists Board. They are also required to have teaching qualifications.

Recommendation 6

The Department should update its recruitment policy and the public website to reflect the second pathway to employ psychologists without teaching qualifications.

Professional training and development

3.54 Quite often, high school students who need counselling are vulnerable and have complex needs. It is important that high school counsellors are equipped with sufficient knowledge and practical skills to support this client group.

3.55 Conditionally registered psychologists are required by the ACT Psychologists Board to complete eight competency certificates to become fully registered. They must also complete 30 hours of professional development each year and undertake half-day visits to other agencies.

3.56 To maintain their registration, registered psychologists (either unconditionally or conditionally) are required by the ACT Psychologists Board to keep a logbook of professional learning during the year. Continued Professional Development of at least 25 hours each year pertaining to psychological practice must be performed.

3.57 To enable counsellors to meet some of these requirements, each semester the Department allows two network meetings to be replaced by a full day of professional learning. A professional learning day in the stand-down periods is also dedicated to psychological practice.

3.58 Audit noted that counsellors also attended courses, workshops or conferences by their own selection. The Department provides financial support of $400 per financial year for counsellors to undertake those activities.

3.59 School counsellors complete a Professional Pathways Performance agreement each year. Its purpose is for school counsellors to set their own professional development goals which they wish to achieve during the year.

[8] http://www.det.act.gov.au/school_education/guidance_and_counselling_service (as at 15 March 2010)

3.60 In response to an Audit questionnaire, a few counsellors, although being part of the process, expressed their concerns that the professional pathways did not contribute real value to their professional development. Review of the format of the pathways agreement was a priority of Student Support's *Business Plan 2009*.[9]

PROVISION OF COUNSELLING SERVICES TO SCHOOLS

3.61 As mentioned earlier in the report, counsellors in ACT schools provide targeted and individual counselling to support students, on issues ranging from learning difficulties, behaviour management, social skills, and family relationships, to assessments for referrals to special education services.

3.62 Counsellors also work collaboratively with classroom teachers, welfare teams, executive teams, parents, and government and non-government agencies to provide proactive and preventative programs to school communities.

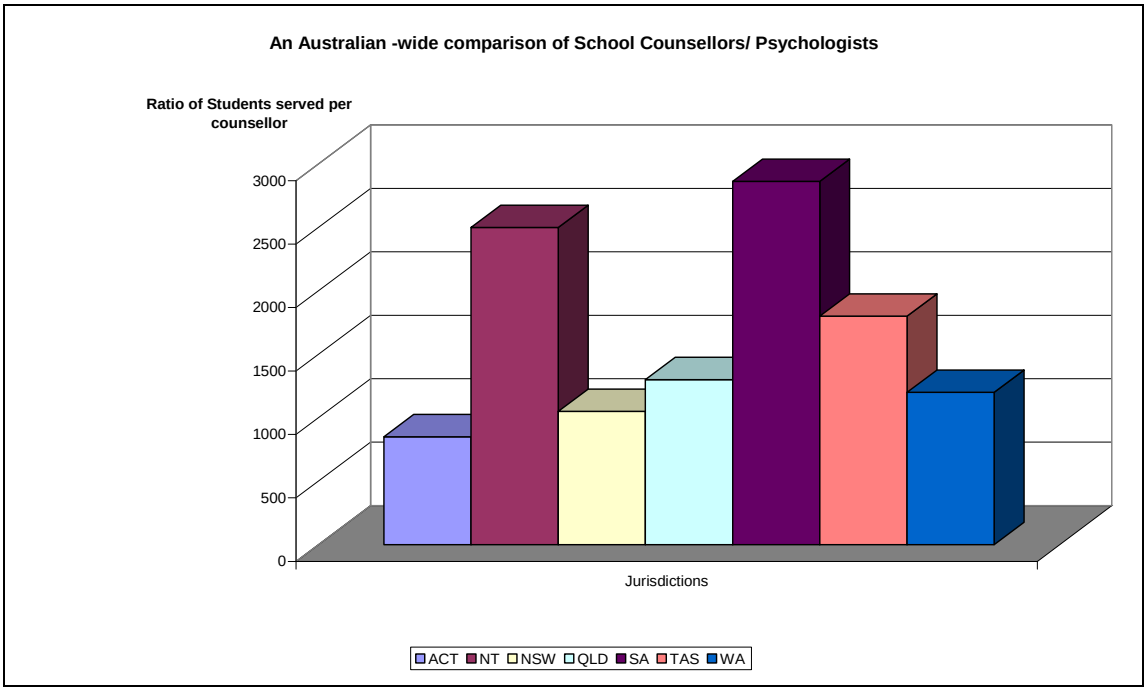
3.63 Most counsellors responding to Audit's questionnaire felt that their role was reasonably well understood by most school staff, but also commented that their roles sometimes overlapped with other school staff supporting students, such as Pastoral Care Co-ordinators, school chaplains, Youth Support Workers and school nurses. This suggests that effective coordination between various student support programs is necessary to ensure an efficient and holistic approach to address complex needs of students.

3.64 Every public high school in Canberra has a counsellor on site, either on a full-time or part-time basis. In 2010, there are 54 counsellors (including one contractor) working in all ACT public schools. Allocation of counsellors to schools is discussed later in this chapter.

3.65 According to a study by the National Executive of the Australian Guidance and Counselling Association (AGCA) in 2008, compared to other jurisdictions the ACT public schools recorded the highest number of counsellors per thousand students, with one counsellor serving 850 students, as shown in the figure below.

[9] One of the actions set out in the Plan was to review the quality of Professional Pathways processes, with request that teams are 'to develop a self assessment tool for use in Pathways reviews'.

Figure 3.1: Numbers of students per school counsellor – Australia 2008



Source: *Australian-wide Comparison of School Counselling Services 2008* issued by the National Executive of the Australian Guidance and Counselling Association (AGCA).

3.66 Audit noted that the Australian Psychological Society, in its *Framework for the Effective Delivery of School Psychological Services* 2009, recommended that 'the student psychologists ratio should not exceed 500 students for one full-time psychologist' to ensure a better service and reduced risk for students'. In 2008, no jurisdictions in Australia achieved this ratio.

3.67 In 2008, ACT school counsellors maintained case files of 3 851 students, among whom 1 086 came from high schools - a 28 per cent representation.[10] High school counsellors reported to Audit that they saw between 40 and 80 students a semester.

Allocation of counselling time to schools

3.68 Allocation of counsellor time to schools is calculated annually from Term 4 of the preceding school year, using projected enrolment numbers for the coming year.

3.69 The allocation is based on a points system, as follows:

- Each one full-time equivalent counsellor is equal to 20 points.

[10] Audit's analysis based on the School Counsellors' Annual Reports 2008 (DET)

- For 45 full-time equivalent counsellors this equals a total of 900 points per week for counselling service to schools.
- From this, 105 points per week (5.25 counsellors) are dedicated to the targeted programs such as the Triple P, Protective Behaviours, Early Intervention, special schools, and small school adjustments.
- The remaining 795 points per week (39.75 counsellors) are then allocated to schools.
- With each day of the counsellor's time equivalent to four points, this means 198.75 counsellor-days are allocated to schools for each week of the school year.
- The basis of allocation of counsellor time to schools each year is the student population, with a double weighting for special education numbers and a one third weighting for preschool numbers.
- The 795 points are divided by the whole ACT public school projected student numbers to establish a 'multiplier' - the ratio of each student's entitlement of counsellor service time. For example, the multiplier in 2010 is 0.02057.
- Each school's actual portion of the service is calculated by multiplying the school's student population by the 'multiplier'.

3.70 Audit found that in reality, due to staff shortfalls, the actual points of service allocated to schools varied each year and were often below 900 points, with the exception of 2009. For example, in 2010 only 843 points of service were allocated to schools, and the allocated service points for 2007 and 2008 were 808 points and 718 respectively.

3.71 Audit also noted that the 105 point allocation for system initiatives for targeted programs was based on historical requirements. Feedback from school principals was that this allocation should be re-examined to ensure the best use of counsellors' time.

3.72 School principals are informed of the planned allocation of counsellors at the end of the preceding year. Through the Student Services Principals Reference Group, principals can comment on the quantum of counsellor time available, or the allocation of counsellors to their individual schools.

3.73 The planned allocation is adjusted based on the February school population census, taking into account the feedback provided by principals. Audit notes that, in practice, schools' ability to demonstrate a need for more counsellor resources can be adversely affected by tight time frames for the final allocation of counsellors.

3.74 The allocation mechanisms aim to equitably allocate a valued resource amongst schools, and to give special consideration to special education students. Annual adjustments of counsellor time based on the projected enrolments and the February school population census enables the service to allocate its resource according to potential demand for services, where demand for services is proportional to the school population.

3.75 However, Audit's view is that the formula, being population based, does not fully reflect the need for counsellor services, which may not be proportional to school population. The allocation method does not address important 'soft factors' such as the school climate or culture, and the socio-economic background of the community from which the school draws its students.

3.76 Research has found that, amongst other factors, individual, family and socio-economic factors are associated with, or contribute to, the development of aggressive and anti-social behaviours in children and young people.[11] Particularly, a number of studies have found that low socio-economic status independently predicts externalising, internalising and cognitive problems.[12]

3.77 Furthermore, the school population-based allocation method does not provide for relief or replacement if counsellors take unplanned leave. For example in 2010, at the time of this audit, the service was unable to provide relief for the senior section in one school due to a counsellor's long-term leave.

3.78 The method also does not make allowance for timely responses to major incidents or crises. The current arrangement is that Senior Counsellors and the Assistant Manager initially respond to major incidents or crises in schools, and co-ordinate additional school counsellor support as needed.

3.79 Audit noted that in 2006, as part of the implementation of the Review of Provision of Counselling and Welfare Services 2003, criteria were established for targeted allocation of counselling resources to schools so that the allocation was not based on student enrolment alone. These criteria identified needs across the system according to:

- students with special needs;
- indigenous students;
- students from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds;

[11] The ACT Department of Education and Training, *A Framework for Understanding Challenging Conduct Behaviours in the Classroom*, 2005.

[12] The ACT Department of Education and Training, *A Framework for Understanding Challenging Conduct Behaviours in the Classroom*, 2005, citing Marshall & Watt, 1999, *Child Behaviour Problems: A Literature Review of the Size and Nature of the Problem and Prevention Interventions in Childhood.*

- indicators of social need from the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSED);
- early intervention support; and
- care and protection issues.

3.80 The proposal, however, was not implemented, therefore some of the criteria were no longer maintained.

3.81 Audit noted that in 2009 Student Services planned to review and if necessary revise its counsellor allocation the method. Audit was advised that the review would be occurring this year for the 2011 allocation, with the support of School Network Leaders and the Student Services Principals Reference Group.

Recommendation 7

The Department should proceed with its planned review of the mechanism by which counsellor time is allocated to schools. In addition to the current considered factors, the assessment of need for counselling services should have regard to:

a) a measure of socio-economic disadvantage;

b) data collected in the counsellors' annual reports; and

c) feedback from schools and counsellors.

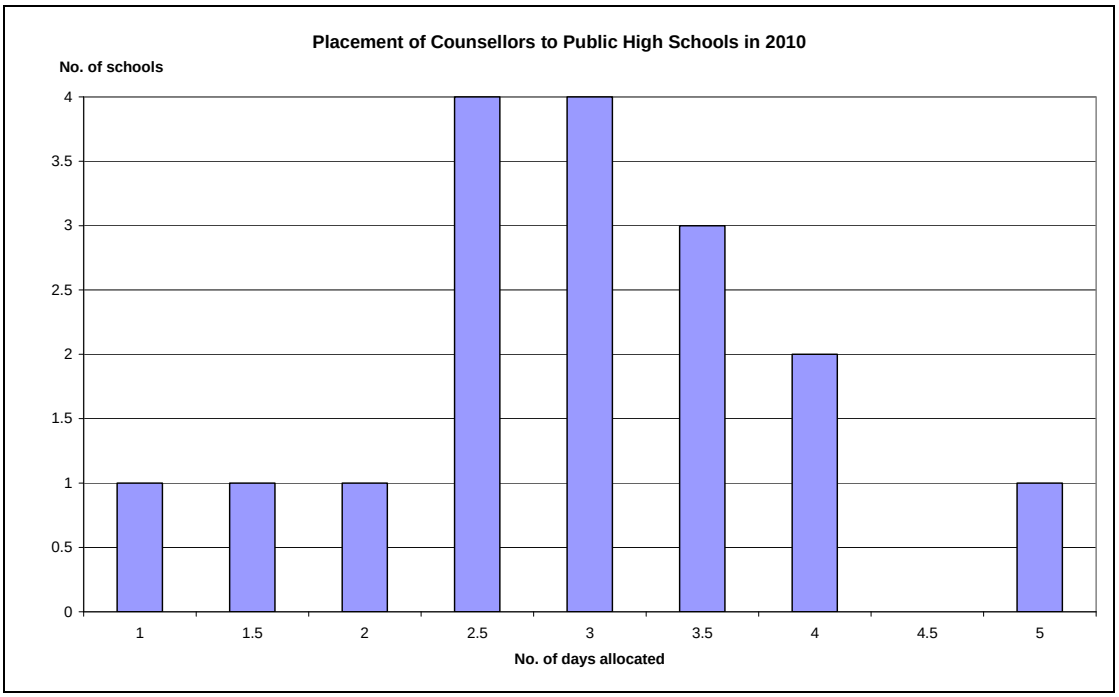
Placement of counsellors in high schools

3.82 Placement of each counsellor to a school or schools is based on the allocation points to which the school is entitled. Audit observed that some counsellors stayed in the same school(s) for many years while others were moved among schools or took on new schools. Audit was advised that the changes were to reflect the changes in the allocation points, and changes in staff working arrangements.

3.83 Audit noted that most counsellors were responsible for more than one school, often in different settings; for example, primary and high schools, or primary and colleges. In 2010, of the 54 counsellors, ten or 18.5 per cent will be required to work in three settings (either three schools in two different settings or two schools and one special program). Amongst these, two are intern psychologists.

3.84 In 2010, among the 17 public high schools, the majority (65 per cent) have three days or less of counselling service a week (as shown in Figure 3.2 below).

Figure 3.2 Placement of counsellors in ACT public high schools in 2010



Source: Audit analysis based on Student Wellbeing and Behaviour Support's placement of counsellors as at 21 April 2010.

3.85 This allocation is decreased by unplanned leave, or when counsellors undertake training or professional learning, or attend district and section meetings. For example, Audit found that, in the school year 2009, counsellors were absent from all schools on 341 days of unplanned leave in total, with 82 days unplanned leave recorded for high schools. This represents 4.1 per cent of the total allocation of counsellors to high schools.

3.86 In the recent survey of the *Role and Effectiveness of the School Counselling Service* by Student Services, almost 40 per cent of respondents commented that the time allocation to their schools was not sufficient to meet the needs of students. The effectiveness of school counsellors was reduced as they lacked time to associate with school staff, as well as time to build trust and rapport with students.

3.87 Likewise, all high school counsellors who responded to Audit's questionnaire commented that time constraint was a major issue and had a significant impact on the quality of the service they were able to provide. Within the time available, they were unable to fulfil all the activities that demanded their services. To manage the workload, they either saw clients in a shorter time than desired, reduced the number of sessions provided to ongoing clients, provided less therapeutic sessions, or referred more clients to external services.

3.88 In its response to the Audit finding, the Department identified that 'while time is an issue in supporting schools, it is important to note that not all cases presented in schools necessarily need counsellor input. The special need [team] or welfare team meetings are an important element in the counsellor filtering their work. Some counsellors need support in how to use this process effectively'.

3.89 Audit is concerned that the Department may not be able to determine the appropriate level of counselling services needed by schools to prevent and reduce risk to students. This is due to the lack of reliable information to assess trends in demand and unmet needs and the current performance of school counsellor services.

Counsellor services

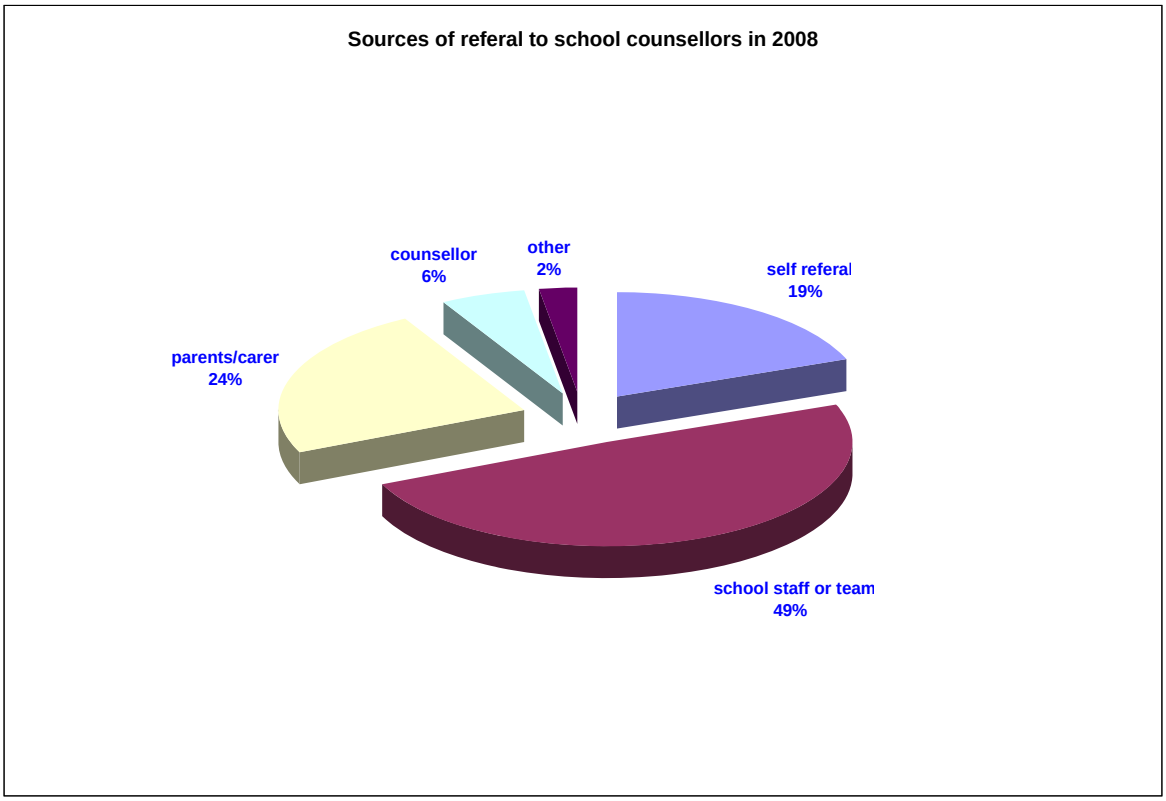
3.90 As listed on the Department's website under the Guidance and Counselling Service section, school counsellors assist students, parents and teachers with issues that can affect the student's educational progress and adjustment by:

- psycho educational assessment and recommendations for support;
- counselling (individual and group);
- referrals to and liaison with community agencies and other professionals;
- in-servicing and consulting with school staff;
- parent liaison;
- parent education and discussion groups;
- curriculum development;
- mediation and negotiation; and
- confidential discussions.

3.91 Information about services provided by school counsellors is made available on the Department's website. Some schools and individual counsellors also distribute pamphlets, or provide information sections on the services available to students and their carers. Processes for referrals are governed by the individual school policies and protocols.

3.92 Students can be referred to school counsellors by their parents, classroom teachers, school staff or self-referred. Figure 3.3 describes the sources of referrals to school counsellors in 2008.

Figure 3.3 Sources of referral to school counsellors in 2008



Source: Audit's analysis based on DET School Counsellors' Annual Reports 2008.

3.93 Audit noted that in the 2009 survey of the *Role and Effectiveness of the School Counselling Service* by Student Services, feedback from schools was highly positive on the performance by and contribution of school counsellors to the school communities. Accordingly, 91 per cent of respondents agreed that their school counsellor's professional contribution was valued by the school community.

3.94 Audit's observation during fieldwork was that school counsellors and senior counsellors are professional and passionate about their role in supporting students and schools. Most counsellors responding to the Audit questionnaire stated that that they wish to have more time for therapy sessions and follow-ups as well as research and reflection on their professional practice.

Assessments

3.95 In some cases, for a student to be eligible for a support program, he or she is required to be assessed by a school counsellor. For example, the *Interim ACT Student Disability Criteria 2004* requires evidence from school counsellors to support an application for support in the following categories:

- intellectual disability;

- pervasive development disorder;
- mental health disorder; and
- chronic medical condition.

3.96 There are 22 tests that school counsellors use in assessments, grouped as:

- assessments of adaptive behaviour;
- assessments of behaviour scales;
- cognitive assessments;
- assessment of memory and learning; and
- screener for mental health.

3.97 Each of these assessment tests provides detailed instructions to counsellors on conducting the tests. They are updated every few years by the institutes or companies who designed the test.

3.98 The demands of legislation upon school counsellors are quite complex and onerous. It is essential that school counsellors become fully familiar with the legislation, policies and standards required for practice.

3.99 Audit found that while there was sufficient guidance provided to counsellors on assessing eligibility the Special Education Program, this was not the case for assessment of students with an intellectual disability. During audit fieldwork, counsellors reported confusion on how to interpret test scores and what role test scores play in the diagnosis of intellectual disability.

3.100 Differing interpretation of the test results particularly in 'classification boundary areas' may affect students' rights to receive appropriate support. To address the issue, the Department in February 2010 has developed the *Best Practice Considerations for the Assessment of Intelligence* to guide counsellors' day-to-day practice in using psycho-educational assessments.

Co-ordination with other welfare staff

3.101 It is important that counsellors integrate well into the school community, in particular the welfare support team. Counsellors' close collaboration with other welfare team members enhances the service quality and provides a complete support for student.

3.102 In their responses to an audit questionnaire, all responding counsellors indicated they considered themselves as part of the welfare team of the school they work at. They work closely with the school Youth Workers, Chaplains and Pastoral-Care Co-ordinators through regular meetings and discussions.

Inter-agency relationships and referrals to other services

3.103 In addition to providing counselling services, another key component of the school counsellor's role is to facilitate access to support, resources and services to address the complex needs of students and families. Counsellors make regular contact with Child Protection within the Office of Children, Youth and Family Services, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) – ACT Health, community based services and other non-government agencies.

3.104 For information on the range of community based services available to students and families, counsellors used *The Big Red Book: A Handbook and Directory for People who Work with Young People in the ACT*, provided by the Youth Coalition of the ACT, a non-profit organisation.

3.105 Audit found that services provided by counsellors often ended at this referral-out point. Follow-ups with the students, carers or service providers depend on the counsellors' personal practice and whether they have time to do so. Student Support did not have sufficient information on whether or not the referral was appropriate or successful or the student's needs had been met.

MONITORING PERFORMANCE AND EVALUATING EFFECTIVENESS

3.106 As with any student support service, proper monitoring and evaluation is important and necessary for the counselling and welfare services of the Department to identify trends, to measure the effectiveness of the counselling intervention, and to assess client satisfaction with the services received.

Data collection

3.107 School counsellors are required to keep case records and report annually on a number of aspects of the service. This is the only source of data that the Department collects on the delivery of school counsellors' services.

3.108 While the data provide basic indicators of the collective and individual tasks and activities performed by counsellors, as well as take up rates for the services, they are of limited value in measuring overall performance of the counselling services and the outcomes achieved for students and schools.

3.109 Audit also found that although the Department collated the information provided in counsellors' annual reports, it did not analyse the information for the purpose of:

- identifying targeted groups of clients and priorities;
- identifying specific needs of each school sector to effectively plan and allocate resources;

- establishing trends to plan for future development of the service; and
- establishing linkages between data collection and performance objectives for both individual counsellors and the service as a whole.

3.110 As pointed out in the Review of the provision of Counselling Services in ACT Schools and Colleges, 2003 (p 57):

> It remains important to respond to individual needs, but also to identify the underlying factors that contribute to the need arising… The number of clients or amount of activity is no longer an effective way to measure the relative achievements of service providers. Instead, there is an increasing focus on measuring the impact of services through the definition of outcomes and observable change that indicates an improvement in individual or population circumstances.

3.111 Data on the take up of the service and outcome measures would be beneficial for monitoring performance of the service. Currently, the Department's collection of data provides insufficient evidence for planning the delivery and funding of an effective and integrated service.

Client feedback

3.112 In 2009, the Department surveyed for the first time school principals, teachers and staff on the role and effectiveness of the school counsellors services.

3.113 The response to the survey was positive in relation to the overall satisfaction with the services. However, most responses to the survey were from primary schools and the early learning and early intervention sector. Some 28 of 172 responses (sixteen per cent) were from high schools and eleven responses (six per cent) from P-10 schools. Audit is concerned that any particular difficulty experienced by the relatively smaller high school sector could be masked by the overall satisfactory results.

3.114 Audit also noted that the Department had not surveyed students, the major group of clients of the service, on satisfaction with the school counselling service.

3.115 The importance of including students in assessing the quality of school counselling services was emphasised in Reid (1996):[13]

> Schools and education authorities must be accountable not only to school staff and parents, but also to their target group, students themselves. If children, the consumers, do not see a service as effectively meeting their needs then there is ultimately little point in providing the service. Children and young people not only have the ability, but also the right to be able to express their opinions on matters affecting them which is often perceptive, valuable and creative.

Recommendation 8

The Department should:

a) systematically collect and analyse data on performance measurements of counselling services to provide sufficient evidence for planning the delivery of an effective and integrated service; and

b) obtain feedback from students in determining if the counselling service was useful or effective in addressing their concerns.

[13] Reid W (1996) *School Counselling - A Client Centred Perspective*, Kids Help Line report, page 14.

4. PASTORAL CARE CO-ORDINATORS AND YOUTH SUPPORT WORKERS

INTRODUCTION

4.1 This chapter assesses the services provided by the Pastoral Care Co-ordinators and the Youth Support Workers.

KEY FINDINGS

- There was extensive use of external community support services to deliver pastoral care services.
- Many Pastoral Care Co-ordinators (PCCs) did not conduct evaluation of external services as required by the departmental guidelines, including the requirement to seek student views, and for results of previous evaluations to be used in selecting future programs.
- Pastoral Care Co-ordinators worked closely with Youth Support Workers (YSWs), and assisted in their professional development. However, most YSWs did not have a professional development plan, as required.
- There was little evidence that YSWs used the detailed program plans, or the priorities plan template as specified in the departmental *Practice Framework* to assist in planning and delivering their services.

PASTORAL CARE IN HIGH SCHOOLS

4.2 Pastoral care in ACT Public Schools is intended to be aligned with the principles of the 2003 *National Safe Schools Framework.*

4.3 The *Student Welfare (Pastoral Care) Package* (the Pastoral Care package) was introduced in the 2007-08 Territory Budget. Funding of $3.99 million in 2007-08 was appropriated, with a further $13.16 million committed for the three years from 2008-09 to 2010-11. Funding provided for the recruitment of seventeen Pastoral Care Co-ordinators, seven classroom teachers, nine school counsellors and a Youth Support Worker.

4.4 The Department has produced a working draft of a *Pastoral Care Co-ordinators: A practice framework* (June 2009) (the *Framework).* The framework describes pastoral care as:

> an holistic approach to meeting the academic, social, emotional and cultural needs of students. Quality pastoral care ensures positive relationships and are the foundation of a supportive school culture where all members of the school community are encouraged to participate and grow in the shared experience of school life.

Pastoral Care Co-ordinators

4.5 The *Framework* defines the focus of the Pastoral Care Co-ordinators (PCCs):

> The PCC has responsibility for the design, implementation and delivery of a variety of curricula and programs in their school-based on the pastoral care needs of their student population.

4.6 The roles of PCCs was described by the Department as follows:

> to involve staff, students and the community in designing and implementing programs that focus on addressing the wellbeing, social and emotional needs of each student. This personalised approach embeds qualities of productive and respectful relationships and a strong sense of community and individual responsibility.

Programs delivered by the pastoral care teams

4.7 Pastoral care teams vary in size and emphasis. High schools have a school counsellor, a pastoral care co-ordinator and Youth Support Workers, but also may have a chaplain, year co-ordinators, school executives with welfare responsibilities; defence transition aides (provided by the Commonwealth Department of Defence to support defence force families) and nurses.

4.8 PCCs may consult with student welfare, year advisors, school counsellors, other staff, students and the broader community in the development of programs. PCCs advised Audit that they ran focus groups of students, and regularly met with the pastoral care team to continually update and evaluate the program against the needs of the student body.

4.9 The *Framework* for PCCs specifies the components or core elements of a pastoral care program, and these include a wide range of matters including, for example, bullying and harassment, mental health and well being, peer leadership and mentoring, student pathways and transition to further educations and/or employment. The *Framework* also advises pastoral care teams of the type of programs that would fall within each of the categories.

Evaluation of Pastoral Care Co-ordinators in high schools.

4.10 In 2008, the Department reported on the first year of operation of the pastoral care initiative, including the Pastoral Care Co-ordinators. The report recommended a PCC practice framework be disseminated; further definition of the role; clarification of the amount of professional learning for PCCs and that the role of Department in relation to the provision of support for the PCC initiative be clarified. These recommendations have been implemented.

4.11 The report also recommended that an evaluation report be facilitated by Student Services in 2010 to provide information on the pastoral care initiative to date and recommend about the future of Pastoral Care Initiative. Student Services intend to implement this recommendation this year.

4.12 In preparing the report, the Department surveyed Pastoral Care Co-ordinators for information on their programs, and the programs' purpose, and effectiveness. The Department also surveyed principals and asked them about the 'personal satisfaction with the PCCs role in your school', and the 'effectiveness of the PCCs role within your school'. The average score on both questions was 3.5, where the highest score of five represented excellence.

4.13 PCCs were asked the same questions, and returned the same average results. Both groups were given the opportunity to comment.

4.14 This Departmental survey provides good feedback on satisfaction with, and the effectiveness of, the Pastoral Care Co-ordinators program. The 2009 survey has yet to be finalised; however, it may be overtaken by the planned evaluation of the Student Support Program.

Use of community and external services - evaluation

4.15 There is extensive use of external community support services to deliver pastoral care services. When these are used, the current framework and the Department guidelines require that the service be evaluated for feedback to the agency and the school's support team. Such information would also be of value to other PCCs looking for a similar program. However, Audit found that evaluation of external programs was conducted by less than half of those PCCs who responded to Audit's query on evaluation.

4.16 Under the School-Based Management System, schools are responsible for the running and evaluation of the program, but do not always comply with the requirement to evaluate programs. This suggests there is a lack of accountability from schools to the Department, and a lack of monitoring for compliance by the Department. In the absence of evaluation information, the Department was unable to assess the effectiveness of external programs used by schools and could not be confident that value of money has been achieved.

Recommendation 9

The Department should:

a) ensure that schools evaluate pastoral care and community-based services from external providers and report results to the Department, and

b) compile and disseminate this information to assist schools in better selecting and using these externally-sourced services.

4.17 The Department advised that it intends to establish an evaluation template for external programs to be used by schools.

Youth Support Workers

4.18 In 2003, the Department commissioned a *Review of the Provision of Counselling Services in ACT Government Schools and Colleges.* The review highlighted the need for a more diverse mix of services as well as the need to further develop the recruitment and training of counselling and welfare staff. The Department developed a multidisciplinary approach to student services with staff from a range of disciplines, including Youth Support Workers (YSWs) in high schools.

4.19 Subsequently, YSWs were placed in eight ACT high schools in 2004. The initiative aimed to assist high schools in supporting students and their families, provide opportunities for growth and enhance students' education and learning. Each high school was allocated with a YSW from January 2005.

4.20 In high schools, Youth Support Workers:

- support and provide direction to students, and work with families and carers;
- maintain links with community-based youth support agencies;
- develop and deliver programs for small groups of students;
- maintain records and documentation to assist with monitoring case load and contribute to the evaluation of the program; and
- participate in training, supervision and in-services.

4.21 Youth Support Workers are school-based staff and fall under the oversight of the school principal, although their day-to-day supervisor is the pastoral care co-ordinator. A YSW co-ordinator resides within Student Services Directorate in the Department. The YSWs work within a *Job Framework*, approved in February 2009.

4.22 An Audit questionnaire on YSWs' activities at schools and discussions during audit indicated that:

- school executives and staff perceived that their YSW fulfilled a good role, and did a good job;
- the YSW's role is oriented toward improving school climate and culture;
- most YSWs had a defined role within the student support team in schools, and this role was understood by staff and the school management;
- YSWs were integrated into the student welfare team, attended student support meetings and had a close working relationship with the pastoral care co-ordinator, who was the line supervisor of the YSW. The YSWs' programs were approved by the PCC and student support team;
- YSWs were active against each category of youth support program in the YSW's *Job Framework;* YSWs spent most time on running groups and programs, and engaging with students, often one to one;
- some YSWs had formed an informal mentoring and information sharing group; and
- a significant number of YSWs were degree or diploma qualified, or had other qualifications and experience. The Department sponsors a Certificate IV in Youth Work, which a number of YSWs had completed.

4.23 Audit also found that:

- PCCs assisted YSWs in professional development, and discussed with YSWs their responsibilities. YSWs attended a range of training related to their responsibilities. However, most YSWs responding to Audit's questionnaire did not have a written professional development plan, as required by the *Job Framework*;
- many YSWs did not use the detailed program plans, or the priorities plan template provided by the Department to plan their programs;
- few YSWs reported to their principal at the end of each semester, as required by their *Job Framework*, or used the YSW database for record keeping. The Department advised that, notwithstanding the requirements of the *Job Framework* to use the YSW database, all records should be paper based;

- whether the youth worker manages cases of students requiring pastoral care services is at the discretion of the principal. Managing a case means to:
  - develop a case plan;
  - co-ordinate services and organise meetings;
  - request files; and
  - support the client.

4.24 The Department's view is that case management is not the role of the YSW at the school.

4.25 The Department further advised that the YSW *Job Framework 2009* has removed the individual case load from a YSW role, and the duty statement needs to be revised accordingly.

Record keeping

4.26 A duty of the YSWs, as noted above, is to keep records to assist in monitoring case load and for evaluation of the program. There are other good reasons for record keeping, such as legislative compliance, accountability, and to satisfy the needs of inquiries and reviews.

4.27 Where, with their principal's agreement, Youth Support Workers manage cases of students, they collect personal information, and would therefore be subject to the Commonwealth's *Privacy Act 1988*. This Act imposes certain requirements on record keepers, in addition to those of the ACT's *Territory Records Act 2002*.

4.28 Although Student Support has held some training and provided some guidance information in recordkeeping for YSWs, Audit found that the legislative requirements and responsibilities imposed on record keepers were not generally understood by Youth Support Workers.

4.29 As a result, data recorded on services provided by the YSWs were unlikely to assist the schools and Student Support in monitoring workload and evaluation of services for improvement.

Evaluation of Youth Support Workers in high schools

4.30 In 2004 an evaluation of the pilot youth support program concluded that:

> Students are readily accessing the YSWs and are provided with wide-ranging support. This ranges from dealing with serious cases of abuse to providing leisure and recreational activities for students. Students have identified recreation [for some this is having a safe and comfortable place in the playground] and peer support as the major concerns that first bring them to

the YSW. The vast majority of students find the YSW an approachable person who is able to provide help, guidance and support.

There are management, resourcing and planning issues that have restricted and constrained the effectiveness of the YSW Project in some schools. Despite these constraints, in all schools the YSW Project has complemented and extended the existing welfare and counselling services. It has played a significant and important role in supporting students.

4.31 Consistent with the Department evaluation in 2004, Audit found that the services by YSWs were valued by schools and fit well into a wide range of student support services. Further training and supervisions provided to the YSWs, including greater use of Departmental guidelines and work plans could further improve their service.

Recommendation 10

To enhance the capacity of Pastoral Care Co-ordinators and Youth Support Workers to support students, the Department should ensure that:

a) each Youth Support Worker has a professional learning plan in place;

b) Youth Support Workers' programs are documented and evaluated; and

c) the Pastoral Care Co-ordinators and Youth Support Workers are provided with record management training appropriate to their roles.

5. STUDENT MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS

INTRODUCTION

5.1 The Student Management Consultants (SMCs) are part of a range of specialised services available to students with particular needs in the ACT public schools. This chapter analyses the operation of the Student Management Consultants (SMCs) and the Complex Needs Team (CNT).

KEY FINDINGS

- The use of Student Management Consultants (SMCs) is part of the overall strategy to build capacity to support students with challenging behaviours in their home school, focussing on direct support to classroom teachers.
- In 2009, schools referred 128 students to the SMCs and 79 students to the Complex Needs Team (CNT). However, these numbers were not complete and did not include continuing cases.
- The Department does not have an easily accessible and reliable database of information of requests or referrals of students to the SMCs and CNT, to assist planning, management and evaluation of the effectiveness of the services. In particular:
  - there was a significant disparity in referral numbers data kept by the CNT and the Department. The lack of accurate referral data can lead to problems of allocating the workload and managing responses to schools;
  - there was no reliable data on the total number of students currently receiving SMC services; and
  - the Department advised that new processes have been put in place in 2010.
- The SMCs' Business Plan includes some performance information, but is not adequate for assessing whether the SMCs are efficiently and effectively supporting schools in managing student behaviours.
- Schools valued the support provided by the SMC team, but were not always confident that SMCs were effective in bringing about significant and positive changes to student behaviours.

BACKGROUND

SMCs' involvement in ACT public schools

5.2 The SMCs provide specialised services to assist ACT public schools with the management of students demonstrating challenging behaviours. The services are available to schools with students from Kindergarten to Year 10 whose behaviours are impacting on their ability to engage in positive educational opportunities.

5.3 The SMCs employ a number of tools and techniques to support schools and students, including Functional Behaviour Assessments (in a narrow range of cases), whole school management support, better practices and risk assessments. The support provided is designed to be responsive and flexible to meet the needs of the school and students. Individual programs are developed to reflect the complexity and need of each situation.

5.4 The SMCs are a short term (usually up to 16 weeks, but can extended by negotiation) consultancy service to schools under the student support model.

> SMCs work to build teacher and system capacity to support learning outcomes for students with challenging behaviours. They work collaboratively with schools to assist in the development of effective individual learning plans and base their work on data collection, analysis and effective pedagogical practice[14].

5.5 Schools obtain the SMCs' services in this manner.

- The school completes a referral, including name of the student, reason for referral (verbal abuse, work avoidance, truanting, non compliance and the like), strategies used to date and comments by the class teacher, school counsellor and principal. The student's parent or carer signs the referral.
- SMC contacts the school to discuss the schools needs and to set up an initial meeting with the school contact person.
- After completion of a service agreement with the SMCs, the school organises a meeting of all interested parties – SMC, other agencies and school staff.
- The SMC collects documentary and observational data, and with school staff develop plans and programs to address student behaviour.
- With school staff, the SMC supports implementation of response plans, monitors and reviews their effectiveness, and provides feedback to school staff.
- After response plans are implemented, the student is discharged from the program. The SMC reports to school staff on the intervention, including if necessary a *Functional Behaviour Assessment*.

5.6 In January 2010, there were 17 SMCs. The Complex Needs Team is a specialist group within the SMCs, and co-operates with it.

5.7 Table 5.1 shows the numbers of students referred to the SMCs and CNT services for 2004 to 2009.

[14] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Student Support Branch, Student Management Consultant service agreement signed by the SMC and the principal of the school.

Table 5.1 Referrals to the SMC and CNT services by year (numbers)

Year	Student Management Consultants	Complex Needs Team
2004	119	1
2005	123	19
2006	111	52
2007	108	65
2008	106	69
2009	128	79

Source: DET, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Student Support Branch

5.8 These figures are not complete. The Department advised Audit that only cases that commenced in the years listed were included in the numbers. Continuing cases were not included. The Department further advised that it would require some effort from the Department to examine paper records to determine the true numbers of cases dealt with in any year.

5.9 The supply of CNT services has grown over the period, probably to respond to increased demand for them. SMC service provision, except for 2009, has been relatively constant.

5.10 Table 5.2 is a compilation of the numbers of referrals that remained in the SMC program, or exited the SMC program, in the 12 months ended April 2010.

5.11 Most clients were primary students –102 students of the total of 157 (65%), with 34 (22%) being high school students.

Table 5.2 Student exiting, or remaining with, the SMC program, by school sector May 2009 to April 2010

	High schools	K-10 schools	Primary schools	Total
Exited the SMC program in the year to end April 2010	28	15	56	99
Remaining in the SMC program at end April 2010	6	6	46	58
TOTAL	34	21	102	157

Source: DET, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Student Support Branch

PERFORMANCE OF THE STUDENT MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT TEAM

Timeliness of services

5.12 In addition to the request for SMC services, the school can also apply for additional resource allocation. Department may allocate additional resources from a central pool to the school. This allocation provides additional Learning Support Assistant days for school to support the implementation of any Individual Learning Plan that the SMC has helped school to develop. Audit found that the Department acted promptly to allocate the time to each referral, on average within six calendar days of the referral request.

5.13 However, Audit was unable to assess the waiting time for students to be provided SMC services following referral. This was due to the lack of reliable data.

5.14 The Department advised that commencement of services may be delayed because of:

- school holidays, particularly December and January each year that run for approximately 50 calendar days;
- requests by schools to delay action on a particular case;
- referrals to the SMCs are triaged, so a less urgent referral may need to wait for others to be actioned;
- delays in obtaining parental permission for SMC intervention, and other procedural delays;
- a preference by high schools for immediate response through the CNT, a subset of the SMCs. The use of CNT services may be followed up with the longer term support from the SMC if required; and
- the unavailability of students and school staff to meet with the SMC after referral and allocation of SMC resources to the case.

Performance information

5.15 The SMCs' *Business Plan* includes performance information. While this would inform management of the operations of the SMCs, it was not sufficient to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the SMCs in supporting schools.

5.16 A satisfaction survey was despatched in 2009, and the Department intends to conduct a similar survey in 2010. Audit's analysis of the 2009 satisfaction survey data is discussed in the section below.

5.17 In 2009 a trial evaluation questionnaire was also sent to a limited number of schools. At the conclusion of the SMC's consultancy, schools were asked a full range of questions to rate the intervention's efficacy. While the intention was for schools to submit these surveys, and presumably for the Department to use this

information to improve the SMC service, no surveys were submitted by high schools. Audit was advised that in 2010 more effort will be taken to gather this information to assess the performance of the SMC services.

Effectiveness of the Student Management Consultants team

5.18 The Department conducted an online survey of the SMC and CNT services during 2009. However, due to a small response rate, (28 to 30 responses per question) the Department did not produce an analysis of the survey data for the high school sector.

5.19 The Department advised that the SMC team will review a model of support for high schools developed based on the survey data in the second half of 2010.

5.20 The results of Audit's analysis of the 2009 survey data related to high schools for the SMCs were as follows:

- ninety per cent of staff understood the purpose of the SMC consultancy;
- two thirds of respondents would recommend the SMCs to colleagues;
- half of respondents thought that the SMCs had increased the skills and knowledge of staff regarding the referred students, with a further 38% neutral on this question. However, only 29% thought that these skills had been transferred to the school, with a similar proportion adopting a neutral stance.
- half of respondents thought that the Student Management Consultants modelling strategies in the classroom is an effective support, with 38% neutral.
- less than 20% of staff felt more confident in managing behaviours displayed by the student referred. Forty three per cent of respondents were neutral.
- less than 20% of respondents felt that the intensity and frequency of problem behaviours had decreased. A further 25% were neutral.

5.21 Although there was a small response rate (28) from high schools, these results generally indicate mixed views from schools and teachers about the effectiveness of the SMC service.

5.22 Most staff would recommend the SMC service to colleagues. Audit noted however that less than 20% of school staff thought that behaviours had improved with SMC intervention, and most did not feel more confident in managing behaviours displayed by the student after receiving the SMC services.

5.23 During audit discussions, school staff acknowledged that, despite the good will, expertise and dedication of SMCs, the breadth and depth of some student behavioural problems were so entrenched and not resolvable by the SMC

consultancy. Audit notes that longer SMC consultancy can be negotiated with schools to support an on-going flexible services.

5.24 These survey results were consistent with Audit discussions with schools and teachers. School management appreciated the planning and strategies of the SMCs and in some cases found them effective in managing challenging behaviours of students in classes, although expressed their views that in most cases changes in student behaviour were temporary.

5.25 Some schools commented that SMCs were not effective in some cases as they recommended strategies that schools had already tried without success, or were unable or unwilling to implement. *Functional Behaviour Assessments*, although not required in all cases, did not play any significant role in SMC interventions. *Individual Learning Plans* prepared by high schools on the other hand were used in most instances.

5.26 Based on Audit's analysis of the Department's data, results of Audit questionnaires and Audit discussions with schools, Audit forms the view that schools valued support by the SMC team, but were not always confident that SMCs were effective in bringing about significant and positive changes to student behaviours.

5.27 The Department indicated that the SMC service is under review, and the method of delivery of SMC services to high schools will change. Further details of this change are not yet available.

Complex Needs Team (CNT)

How the CNT works

5.28 The CNT is a rapid response team within the SMCs. The CNT contacts the school within 24 hours of its request for help, and meets with the school executive soon after initial contact. Unlike the SMCs, who work with staff and students, the CNT works only with school staff to develop a support plan, a Crisis Management Plan (in most situations) and a plan for on-going support of the student.

5.29 Following short term intensive support, the student may be discharged from the CNT program, and placed in longer term support provided by the SMCs.

Where the CNT works

5.30 The CNT advised Audit that it had taken on 81 cases from April 2008 to December 2009. Student Support has data for 41 referrals to the CNT for the period September 2007 to September 2009.

5.31 Student Support advised that the database from which its data was extracted did not produce reliable reports, and suffered design deficiencies preventing some essential data being stored in the database.

5.32 Without reliable case data, the ability of the Department and the CNT to manage its services can be adversely affected. The Department advised that processes are now in place to ensure that data is accurately recorded on the database.

5.33 Table 5.4 shows the distribution of the 81 cases recorded by the CNT across school sector, with number of days on average for each.

Table 5.4 Complex Needs Team services by school sector April 2008 to December 2009

School sector	Number of CNT cases	Average length of case from entry to discharge (calendar days)
Kindergarten	8	98
Primary	36	147
High	37	139
	Total 81	Overall average 138

Source: DET, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Student Support Branch

5.34 These figures showed that all school sectors used CNT services, with primary and secondary school sectors receiving about the same number of services. Compared to primary schools, high schools used more CNT services relative to student populations.

5.35 For Terms two and three of 2009, only one CNT staff was available. Although during that period, SMCs and executive staff responded to some requests for CNT services, the number of CNT services was reduced. This situation arose, because CNT staff, being leading teachers, cannot be backfilled temporarily.

5.36 The CNT, is intended to be a short term consultancy, although the length of time from entry to discharge of high school students is on average over four and a half months. The Department advised that the CNT supports clients in other programs for longer periods, including those exiting the Bimberi Youth Justice Centre. The length and nature of support depends on the complexity of the case, and in these circumstances support is not intended to be short term. This impacts the average time of support for high school students.

5.37 Student Support has relied on the annual survey to schools on service provision and the pre- and post- questionnaires of individual cases to measure performance of the SMC team. However, the Department did not analyse the data for monitoring or evaluating purposes. There were no targets of the number of cases to respond to, or the number of outstanding requests from schools or the waiting time. In particular, for cases where students have remained in the CNT/SMC

support system for a long period, there was no timeline targets set for review to ensure that the support strategies still worked for the schools and the students.

5.38 Audit considers that for effective management of the SMC and CNT services, the Department and schools need to have relevant information to identify needs, assess any unmet demand from schools, set appropriate targets and have more robust system in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the services.

Recommendation 11

The Department should:

a) redesign its referral database to allow for accurate and complete records of the numbers and details of referrals to, and services by, Student Management Consultants and Complex Needs Team;

b) develop clear performance measures for Student Management Consultants and Complex Needs Team services; and

c) evaluate the effectiveness of Student Management Consultants and Complex Needs Team services.

APPENDIX A: LIST OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

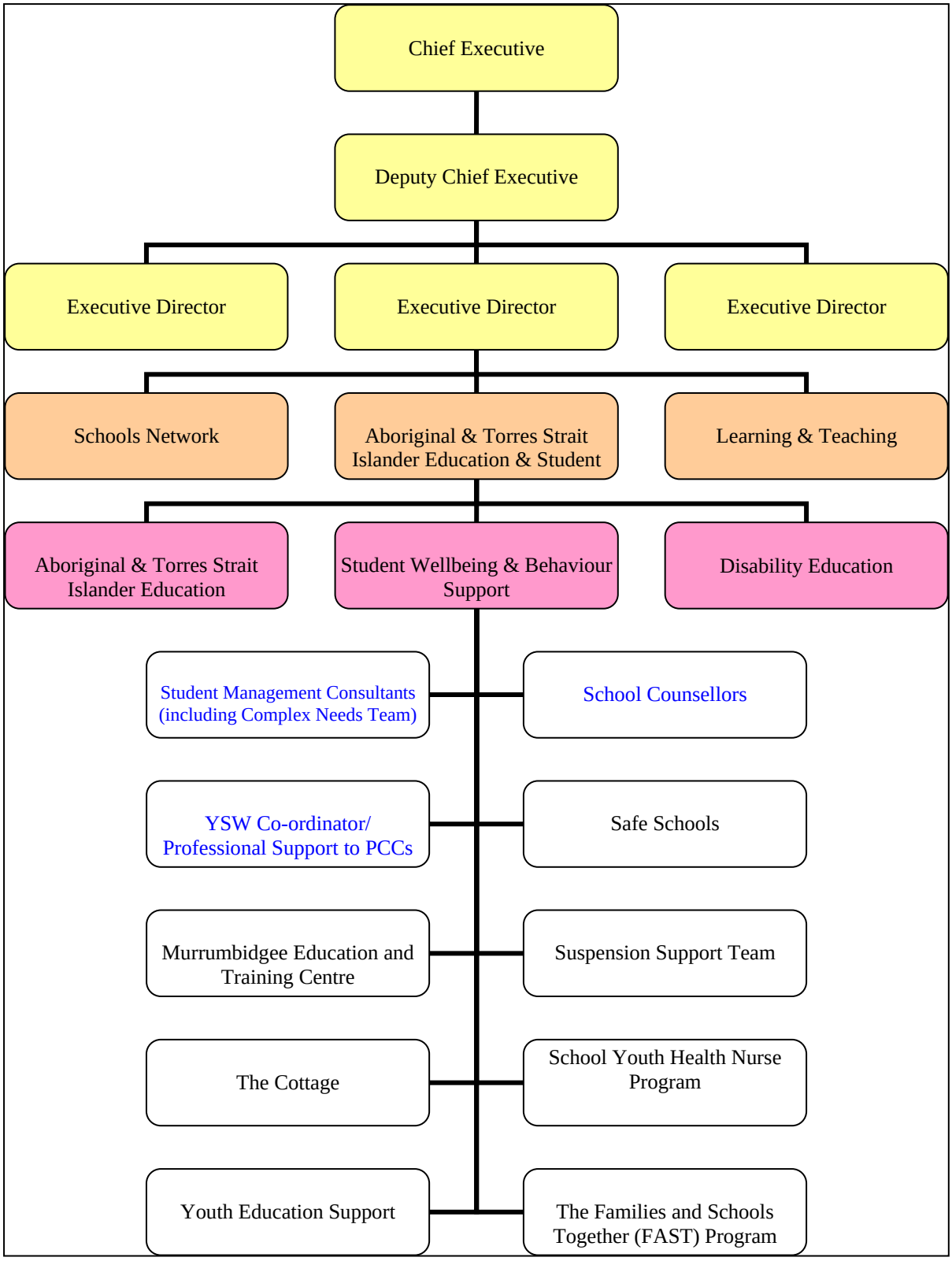
List of student support services (excluding special education programs)

Service and staffing	Details
Behaviour, Counselling and Welfare (direct service delivery to schools)	
Student Management Consultants (12 Teachers)	Student Management Consultants work to build teacher and system capacity to support learning outcomes for students with challenging behaviours.
Complex Needs Team (1 Social Worker, 3 Teachers)	The Complex Needs Team consists of Student Management Consultants, and one social worker, who specifically work with young people with high and complex needs.
Youth Education Support (2 Youth Workers)	Youth Workers liaise with schools and facilitate connections to a broader support network. They work to re-engage young people in education, and support their participation in school and community life.
Counselling and Welfare (45 full-time equivalent School Counsellors)	School counsellors (psychologists) provide assessment and counselling for students and advice to teachers and parents.
Families and Schools Together Team (3 Social Workers)	This team seeks to re-engage high school student in their learning by providing social worker support to families.
School Youth Health Nurse Program (4 Nurses)	A pilot project to promote positive health outcomes for young people and their families.
Youth Connection Transition Program	Youth Connections work with young people and their families whose attendance at school is problematic.
Professional Support to School Staff	
Professional support of Pastoral Care Co-ordinators in High Schools	To support Pastoral Care Co-ordinators (PCC) in high schools with on-going professional learning through regular student support PCC Network meetings.
Professional supervision of Youth Workers in High schools (1 Senior Youth Worker in Student Services)	To support the Youth Worker program in high schools with professional supervision and on-going professional learning opportunities.
Achievement Centres - Years 7-10	To support Year 7-8 students who are beginning to disengage with their learning by targeting literacy, numeracy and social skills.
Connect 10 Program - Years 9-10	Through an individualised program the Connect 10 program will support Year 9 and 10 students to re-engage with education and support students to transition to future schooling, training or work.

Interagency Meetings	
Child and Youth Interagency Network (CYIN)	CYIN is a collaborative network of agencies that meets to support students with complex needs.
Management Assessment Panel (MAPs)	MAPs is a interagency meeting chaired by the Child and Youth Advocate for children and youth with a disability with complex needs.
AFFIRM	Supporting families who have child with a disability that are in danger of family breakdown.
Turnaround	Turnaround is a program in Department of Housing and Community Services that aims to improve service response for young people (12-18 years) who have complex issues in their lives that require a co-ordinated multi-service response.
Integrated Family Support Program	Integrated Family Support Program is a program in Department of Housing and Community Services that aims to improve service response children who have complex issues in their lives that require a co-ordinated multi-service response.
Complex Review Panel Care and Protection	The review panel discusses complex Care and Protection cases to generate strategies to support children and young people

Source: DET, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Student Support Branch

APPENDIX B: GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE FOR STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAMS



APPENDIX C: AUDIT CRITERIA, APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

AUDIT CRITERIA

Audit assesses the delivery of student support services to high school, based on the following criteria:

- The Department has adequately defined the program, its goals, and accountabilities, and effectively communicated this to relevant stakeholders (schools, teacher, students, parents, specialists etc).
- The Department has adequately supported schools, teachers and professional staff in the delivery of the selected programs.
- The Department has adequately monitored the performance of selected programs, and taken appropriate action to improve services.

AUDIT APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The audit approach and methodology consisted of:

- review of legislation and its requirements;
- review of policies, frameworks and procedures which govern the delivery of the selected student support programs;
- review of relevant reports, studies, and reviews undertaken in the area of student support;
- consultation with the Department's executives, managers and school staff, in particular the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Education and Student Support Branch;
- attendance at meetings of school counsellors, and of other pastoral care staff;
- questionnaires to school-based pastoral care staff and principals; and
- a literature review on the delivery of the selected student support programs.

AUDIT REPORTS

Reports Published in 2009-10	
Report No. 2 / 2010	Student Support Services for Public High Schools
Report No. 1 / 2010	Performance Reporting
Report No. 8 / 2009	2008-09 Financial Audits
Report No. 7/ 2009	Annual Report 2008-09
Report No. 6 / 2009	Government Office Accommodation
Report No. 5 / 2009	Administration of employment issues for staff of Members of the ACT Legislative Assembly
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Report No. 7 / 2006	Annual Report 2005-06
Report No. 6 / 2006	Vocational Education and Training
Report No. 5 / 2006	Rhodium Asset Solutions Limited

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