



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Submission
to the
DEECD 'Safe and Caring Schools'
Student Support Service
consultation

Brotherhood of St Laurence

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Brotherhood of St Laurence
67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy Vic. 3065

ABN 24 603 467 024

www.bsl.org.au

For further information or to discuss this submission, please contact:

Emily Duizend, Strategic Development Officer
Through School to Work Transition
Brotherhood of St Laurence
Email: eduizend@bsl.org.au
Ph: (03) 9483 1392

Summary

The Brotherhood of St Laurence welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback and suggestions to the Victorian Government's proposed new governance and resource model for the Student Support Service (SSS).

We understand that this reform will require school principals to work together within a local cluster model, supported by a Chair and Coordinator, to determine the best use of the SSS. The intention is to give more autonomy to schools to decide the priorities of service delivery, while balancing the needs of their students to ensure fairness, equity and access within a transparent SSS budget.

Given the level of student welfare data to be considered by the network, the Brotherhood feels it is important that the Student Support Service Network does not operate in isolation, but is integrated within a more strategic local focus on student engagement. An effective example of this is the regional Grampians Education Partnership, which promotes a collective responsibility for young people, resulting in collaboration and partnering across sectors (health, education, local government) to ensure support is available for children and young people and new initiatives are created when required. We recognise that the development of strategic regional approaches to prevent disengagement is beyond the focus of this current consultation process. We intend to make future representations to government on the issue in the future.

This submission focuses on three key suggestions that we believe would enhance the capacity of this proposed governance and resource model to appropriately meet the needs of students. These are:

1. That the governance model for the Student Support Services specifies the inclusion of the needs of students who are funded through the Student Resource Package (SRP) but receive their education in alternative educational settings such as Community VCAL.
2. That the proposed model is strengthened by a consistent framework for needs assessment and consistent use of data by the individual schools in the network, so the SSS staff are deployed in an equitable and strategic way. This would also provide evidence to support continuing dialogue with government for additional SSS resources should they be required.
3. That community and health-focused organisations are enabled to contribute their knowledge to the Student Support Services networks of school principals to support effective planning for the deployment of the SSS in local areas.

In the longer term, we strongly encourage the Victorian Government to further reform the assessment of student learning barriers and provision of support services by consolidating and integrating the current array of programs, including the SSS, into a more efficient and effective single student development service.

1 The Brotherhood of St Laurence

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the BSL continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty. We undertake research, service development and delivery, and advocacy with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating the understandings gained into new policies, new programs and practices for implementation by government and others.

The Brotherhood has taken a leading role in trialling innovative approaches to assisting disadvantaged young people to overcome barriers to learning and remain engaged in education. Our current initiatives include a best-practice Community VCAL pilot project in Frankston, which supports young people to learn in a real world context, to overcome significant welfare barriers and to plan pathways to economic independence and adulthood. We also deliver the Youth Connections contract in partnership with Taskforce Community Agency across Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula. This federally funded program acts as a safety net to reconnect disengaged or disengaging young people with education or training.

Formal evaluations are part of both these initiatives and we are committed to sharing our findings with other stakeholders from the education sector and the local community and with policy makers to influence better approaches to assisting all young people to achieve Year 12 or equivalent and make a successful transition to independent adulthood.

2 Inclusion of the needs of students in Community VCAL and other settings receiving SRP funds

The Brotherhood supports the Service Delivery principles outlined in the Guiding Principles section of the Safe and Caring Schools SSS consultation paper. These include fairness, equity, access and stages of schooling, prevention, flexibility and integrated service alignment. However, our concern is that the proposed governance and resource model does not adequately cover the needs of those settings that have students who receive SRP funding but are outside mainstream schools.

We believe that without specific guidance from the department, the proposed model, which will depend on the decision making of school principals primarily concerned with the issues facing students located at their own schools, is at risk of neglecting the needs of students who are in alternative education settings. Such settings include Community and Satellite VCAL, as well as other re-engagement programs where young people are enrolled in a mainstream school but receive their education mainly off site.

From a fairness, equity and access standpoint, all students enrolled in DEECD schools should have the same degree of access to support resources regardless of whether they are in mainstream school settings. This is particularly important given the high wellbeing needs that exist among students in community-based alternative education. Our research has shown that barriers to learning for students in these programs include high levels of poverty, substance abuse, mental health issues such as depression, and homelessness (Bond 2011; Myconos 2010 & 2011). When multiple forms of disadvantage occur, they intersect and have a compounding effect on students' ability to learn. In trying to help students overcome multiple barriers, teachers often have very limited funding or

access to student wellbeing support and expertise. The result can be high burn-out rates for teaching staff who often find themselves under pressure to undertake the multiples roles of social worker and psychologist, as well as teacher.

In line with its prevention and capacity building role, the SSS should be able to assist Community VCAL and other providers to increase their student welfare support capabilities, as well as provide individual assessments and services to students where this expertise is required.

We believe that the guiding principles for the new governance model should make the following points:

- Principals on the SSS Network have a responsibility to ensure that they represent the needs of *all* students, including those that they have enrolled but who are attending alternative education settings.
- Principals should thus ensure that the partnering arrangements they have with such education providers facilitate the accurate assessment and communication of student needs in these settings to the principal, for inclusion in the planning of SSS delivery.

We would also urge the principals in the networks to invite the coordinators of Community VCAL programs to take part in any localised priority setting process for the Student Support Service.

3 A consistent framework for determining the priorities of the Student Support Service

We believe that the proposed governance model would be strengthened by a framework for needs assessment that would be agreed by each principal in the network. Such a framework would then be used within each individual school and supported by the consistent use and interpretation of data. This would help principals ensure that the SSS staff are deployed in an equitable and strategic way. The resulting data would also provide the necessary evidence to support continuing dialogue with government for additional SSS resources should they be required.

In our previous submissions to DEECD, the Brotherhood has called for management structures within schools to adapt to enable greater emphasis on accurate and timely assessment of the needs of students (BSL 2010a, 2010b). This would mean needs are identified early and would lead to appropriate school capacity building (for example strengthening the capacity of the workforce within schools to meet student needs) as well as intervention with individual students. An example of how this might work in practice would be the consistent use of the Student Mapping Tool, by well trained staff members within a dedicated school wellbeing structure. Ideally this would be applied consistently across all schools in a network, including community-based settings such as Community VCAL, with information then going to the principals' SSS network to determine the most appropriate use of the SSS.

4 Consultation with community agencies

Recent policy and consultation papers by DEECD have stressed the importance of adopting a shared responsibility between community stakeholders to address student disengagement. We support the government's direction in encouraging schools to work together to plan the use of SSS

officers but believe the guiding principles underpinning the proposed model should include a principle relating to consultation with a range of community stakeholders.

The resources and expertise within community organisations will enhance the capacity of the SSS network to deliver on its objectives of prevention, capacity building, partnership and service delivery. Examples of this might include:

- development of joint initiatives between schools, SSSOs and community agencies, particularly as an objective of the SSS is *'work in collaboration with schools, networks and services within the community to identify and intervene early with children and young people who have additional needs or are at risk of disengagement'* (DEECD 2011)
- contribution of community data and expertise to the planning process, to augment the data collected by schools. Strong emphasis should be given to the involvement of the Youth Connections service in network decision making, due to its capacity to provide local information on youth disengagement and thus inform initiatives to prevent disengagement.

We would thus urge the government to ensure the SSS guiding principles encourage effective consultation with community welfare agencies, the Youth Connections service, refugee support agencies, Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs), and community health, mental health and disability representatives to support planning for the use of SSS, ensuring strategic coordination between the SSS and other resources for wellbeing within local areas.

Conclusion

We thank the Victorian Government for the opportunity to contribute to this important consultation. By addressing the above issues as part of the proposed resource and governance model, we believe the effectiveness of the Student Support Service will be enhanced. The mechanisms we propose will ensure that each network of principals is equipped to make sure all students are able to access the support they need in a timely and consistent manner. It will also ensure this occurs regardless of whether students are in mainstream school settings or receiving their education in the community with funding through the Student Resource Package.

In the longer term, we strongly encourage the Victorian Government to further reform the assessment of student learning barriers and the provision of support services by consolidating and integrating the current array of programs, including SSS, into a more efficient and effective single student development service. This approach would enable early identification of risks to student completion, better coordination of support under a key worker model and more effective integration between schools and community services. Students with multiple risk factors for disengagement would receive continuity of support through their learning years across different education settings. The outcomes sought through the proposed changes to SSS should therefore be viewed as part of a more substantial reform package to ensure that all students are able to obtain the support needed to maximise their chances of completing education to Year 12 and beyond.

References

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