



*Submission to the  
Victorian Government's  
Strengthening Student  
Support Services  
Consultation*

Brotherhood of St Laurence  
September 2008

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## **Introduction**

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (the Brotherhood) 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 Brotherhood continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty, guided by principles of advocacy, innovation and sustainability. Our work includes direct service provision to people in need, the development of social enterprises to address inequality, research to better understand the causes and effects of poverty in Australia, and the development of policy solutions at both national and local levels.

The Victorian Government has requested feedback on how it can strengthen student support services. This submission to the consultation considers the issues in light of the recently released Victorian Government *Blueprint for Early Childhood and School Reform*, of which strengthening the student support service is one key strategy. While this may be seen as outside the focus of this consultation, the Brotherhood of St Laurence believes that this issue must be considered in light of other systemic issues within the mainstream school system itself that, without reform, will impact on the ability of the Student Support Service to meet the needs of all students that require its support. Therefore, the focus of this submission is on the need to reform the way student wellbeing is managed within schools to complement the reform of the Student Support Service.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence values this opportunity to contribute to the consideration of the arrangements for Strengthening Student Support Services.

## **Policy context for reform**

*“Education and early childhood development are among the most effective pathways out of disadvantage and social exclusion, and many high-achieving Victorians come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Our challenge is to ensure this potential is available to all Victorian children and young people, regardless of their location or cultural background, or other possible barriers to success.” (DEECD 2008: p.23)*

In its *Blueprint for Early Childhood and School Reform* the Victorian Government recognizes that some children and young people need extra or more individualised opportunities and support in order to achieve their best. The Government has committed to embark on further reform to ensure our schools and children’s services are equipped to respond effectively to the needs of all children.

The reform of arrangements for Student Services Support Officers (SSSOs) outlined in the Blueprint under Action 3 is intended to provide young people in schools with better access to the services they need. However, the Brotherhood believes strongly that reform of the Student Support Services Program needs to be partnered by reform within schools that will see schools place equal emphasis on ensuring their students wellbeing as they do on the schools business arrangements and on teaching.

## **Towards a model of in-school support to work with the Student Support Services Officers**

The Grampians management model for SSSOs outlined in the *Strengthening Student Support Services* discussion paper appears to be robust and well thought through; however, an external Student Support Services resource alone will not be enough to ensure that the needs of all young people are able to be met to give them the best chance of making a successful transition through compulsory education.

The Brotherhood believes that ensuring no young person slips through the net of support will require reform within school structures as well as regional planning. A key reason for this is often school-based practitioners whose work focuses on the needs of vulnerable young people need to provide assistance to young people both inside and outside the school, and to maintain strong community networks and relationships. Flexibility and understanding management support is required to allow these practitioners to meet the needs of students effectively. The Brotherhood's own program experience and research, particularly through the implementation of the Transition Workers in Schools project, has revealed a rigidity of management structures in some schools, as well as a rigidity in school cultures, particularly around notions of how staff within mainstream schools should operate. These factors have been seen to impede the ability of some welfare focused practitioners within schools to carry out their work effectively.

The Brotherhood would like to see each school have a dedicated management stream focused specifically on ensuring every student's individual development and fostering student resilience. This management stream would have responsibility for a specific team of staff focused on the students' individual development and wellbeing, which might involve agencies and community groups outside the school as core team members.

### **A triage approach in schools**

One way to ensure effective engagement and deployment of SSSOs and to ensure that no young person is neglected or lost within the school system, would be if schools had the capacity to triage. Key student groups requiring this type of triage assessment would be all new students, students referred by teachers and self referrals. If the triage were provided by a dedicated team located within the school this would provide a vital and effective link between the school and the Student Services Support Program for those young people with higher level needs.

A triage approach is particularly important for new students entering the school. A key transition support area currently missing from the government Blueprint agenda is the transitions young people make between schools due to moving location, trouble fitting in with school environments and a raft of social problems faced by young people who are at risk (these are outlined in the *Vulnerable Youth Framework*). Too often the needs of these young people who enter schools at unusual points are missed due to the pressures within a school system. The needs of such young people would be better able to be met if schools had a flexible triage system that was able to quickly identify and assess the type of support required by these young people.

A dedicated team focused on student's individual development, which is responsible for the triaging of students would enhance the capacity of the school to ensure each student's positive individual development. Such a team could bring vital programs and services together, such as careers advice and Managed Individual Pathways, as well as student welfare. Currently, such roles are often undertaken by busy teachers.

These programs and services provided by team members could include the following:

- **All students:** Services provided could include Careers Advice, Managed Individual Pathways Support, Parent engagement as career transition supports, opportunities to engage in citizenship and participation in the community
- **Students with middle level needs:** Access to tutoring, counselling, mentors, youth pathways, referrals to SSSOs where needed and community services where needed
- **Students with higher level needs:** social work, youth work, tutoring, counselling, youth pathways, transitions support, and referral to SSSOs, community services and community based programs where needed

The Blueprint outlines the need for a more finely tuned approach to school management to be put in place to assess school performance against a balanced set of measures and to implement a broader range of strategies for school improvement. The above approach covers the three major

outcome areas of student learning, student wellbeing, and pathways and transitions. A management stream and team dedicated to student development which includes assistance with pathways and transitions would provide schools with enhanced capacity to improve in all outcome areas outlined in the Blueprint.

## **Ensuring the successful deployment and targeting of Student Support Services**

The creation of management structures in schools which focus on young peoples' development would extend the capacity of schools to better support young people with barriers to succeeding in education. In many schools it is likely to be teaching staff that make referrals to the Student Support Service when issues come to the fore. There needs to be capacity within schools for monitoring outcomes of such referrals, and for communicating with the regional Student Support Service planning team about the needs of students.

An effective triage system within a school would be well placed to collect data on student wellbeing needs, enabling better regional planning and targeting of SSSOs and resources. This would meet one of the key objectives of the new arrangements for Student Support Services.

The Brotherhood would like to see school structures adapting to ensure, as outlined under Action 7 in the Blueprint, priority is given to quickly and effectively supporting students who fall behind. We agree strongly with the Blueprint which talks about the need to focus on accurate and timely assessment so students' progress can be monitored and support provided as soon as it is needed. A student development team and triage system would help facilitate this, liaising with teaching staff and the SSSP to ensure the right supports are put in place.

## **Community and school partnerships**

The Blueprint has outlined the Government's intention to develop a *Differentiated Support Framework* to provide guidance to teachers on responding to the range of student abilities and backgrounds they will find in any classroom. It is unclear what this will look like at this time, but the Brotherhood supports this in principle. A team of practitioners within a school dedicated to student's individual development might well have the capacity to provide this type of guidance and support to their teaching and administrative colleagues, as well as facilitate school engagement with community organisations that also have a role to play in schools by strengthening the capacity of schools to understand and provide for the wellbeing needs of students.

The Brotherhood believes that community organisations should partner with education settings to test out ways to enable schools to achieve better outcomes for student individual development, which will lead to better results in the outcome areas of student learning, and pathways and transitions.

This is in line with the Blueprint recommendation that schools and early childhood services make the most of partnerships that may be available with community groups and agencies, business and philanthropic organisations. However, reliance by the government on partnerships is problematic because it depends on many variable factors: leadership styles and personalities, geographic availability of potential partners, and social networks and relationships. In addition sustainability and access to partnerships, particularly with business, and business-linked philanthropy can also be affected by the economic climate. Even with such partnerships in place, government still has the responsibility to provide sufficient funding to provide timely services, particularly for those students with high level needs who will be lost if action is not swift and comprehensive.

The Brotherhood itself forges its partnerships with schools with the hope that positive benefits of such partnerships can be both sustained beyond the partnership, and evaluated for elements of success that can be considered in a public policy framework to benefit all young people through continued positive systemic education reform.