

School-Based Mental Health Service Policy

Council acknowledges that mental health disorders adversely affect the emotional wellbeing, social functioning and academic achievement of students.

Council believes the Northern Territory government is responsible for providing a school mental health service with mental health practitioners to support young people with mild to moderate and emerging mental health concerns.

The position of Council is that mental health practitioners must be permanently based in individual schools to provide an early intervention mental health service.

School-based mental health practitioners build strong relationships with students, parents, and staff, fostering trust and understanding. Being present within their school community enables mental health practitioners to proactively address students' mental health needs, identify early warning signs, and provide timely interventions.

Council believes there should be no requirement for a student to complete their mental health request in a form, application or referral to the agency prior to accessing a school mental health service.

Council recognises that schools are the ideal platform for promoting good mental health, responding to students with mild to moderate and developing mental health concerns, and supporting referrals where necessary to a mental health service.

School mental health practitioners

Council believes practitioners working in a school mental health service must have a background in psychology, social work or occupational therapy. Practitioners include:

- Psychologists
- Counsellors*
- Social Workers
- Occupational Therapists
- Nurses with a mental health specialisation.

*Counsellors must have completed a Bachelor of Counselling or a Master of Counselling and be a practising/fully qualified member of either the Australian Counselling Association (ACA) or the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA).

Practitioners must be eligible for appropriate registration or membership with the relevant authority.

Role of school mental health practitioners

Council believes the service must be designed to support young people who may be experiencing mild to moderate mental health problems and intervene early in the development of more serious mental health concerns. The services they provide should include:

- assessing student mental health needs and concerns
- supporting students to develop strategies to manage distress and maintain their mental health.

- contributing to referral and case management processes for students with more complex mental health presentations.
- supporting referrals and linking to external support services as required
- developing the mental health literacy of the school community.

Council supports practitioners to work collaboratively with students and families, education staff, other support service providers and external agencies to support young people to improve their psychological health and emotional wellbeing.

Access and Equity

Council believes schools should receive a school based mental health service practitioner either full time or part time, based on the number of students enrolled at the school.

The Council recognises the guidelines set by the Australian Psychological Society (APS), which recommend a ratio of one psychologist to 500 students. However, given the unique context of the Northern Territory, we support the following ratios to ensure practitioners can effectively meet the needs of students and provide them with the necessary support.

- Schools with less than 100 students should have at least one part-time practitioner assigned.
- Schools with less than 500 students should have at least one full-time practitioner assigned.
- Schools with 500 or more students should have at least two full-time practitioners assigned.

Council supports the provision of alternative support services for remote schools where having dedicated mental health practitioners may not be feasible due to geographical challenges. These may include, but must not be limited to, access to telephone and online counselling services. The alternative support services must only be provided following community approval through local decision making.

Council recognises there can be wait lists and funding challenges for students who need diagnosis and intensive clinical treatment. While a school mental health service will not resolve this issue, early intervention may prevent the need for a more intensive service for some students.

Role of student wellbeing leaders and other support staff

Council believes schools should continue to have student wellbeing leaders, student support services and other health and wellbeing roles as part of a whole-of-school support structure. A school based mental health service must be an additional service.

Support and Training for Wellbeing Teams

Council advocates for training in trauma-informed practices and mental health first aid for all members of school wellbeing teams. This will enhance their ability to support students' mental health and foster a positive culture of wellbeing within schools.