



YOUR VOICE FOR NT PUBLIC EDUCATION

SCHOOL COUNSELLORS MUST BE BASED IN SCHOOLS

President Tabby Fudge of the Northern Territory Council of Government School Organisations responds to a decision by the Department of Education to remove current School-Based Counsellors from their schools.

"These counsellors were based in their schools and provided ongoing, one-on-one services to students at their school."

"School Counsellors operated broadly across Prevention, Early and Complex Intervention levels, including referrals."

"Early identification of risks in children offers a great potential for improving health, and social outcomes. Schools need to be effective gateways for students and their families to access help."

"The core function of a School Counselling Service is to promote social and emotional wellbeing, with a strong focus on prevention, this is critical for student engagement in schooling."

"The Department of Education has implemented a new model, a 'triage model' - where schools are required to consult with a contact person in the Mitchell Centre, with their request for a counselling service for a student. The contact person will then confirm if the student is eligible for counselling support and advise what the next steps are for the school in requesting support."

"NTCOGSO does not accept that a prevention model, which includes identifying risks to children, should be taken out of schools and centralised."

"The NSW Suicide Prevention Strategy 2010-2015 highlighted schools as a critical location in identifying risks to children and providing pathways to care and support. "

"Our students are deeply concerned at this decision and implore the Department of Education to consider the rising level of youth mental health issues and suicides."

"Over the years the Department of Education has recruited and been unable to retain many school-based counsellors. We need to ask why; why are so many counsellors moving to non-government schools or other departments? Why isn't the NT Department of Education an employer of choice for counsellors?"

"The few counsellors that remain, now rotate through several schools and only on certain days. On days they are not visiting, there is no trusted counsellor for our children to confide in and seek support from."



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Background

(Credit Dr Chris Barrett Study of The School Counselling Service in Northern Territory Government Schools (2018))

1. **The Qualified School Counsellor Program** was implemented following the Report on Future Directions for Secondary Education in the Northern Territory (Future Directions, 2003) and the consequent Building Better Schools initiatives whereby **19 professionally qualified school counsellors were appointed to every secondary school (NT 2005).**

At the time of the STUDY OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELLING SERVICE IN NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS **2018 there were 21 school counsellors.**

The report recommended:

- an expansion to the School Counselling Service, through increased numbers of counsellors and greater access to service by students and schools, with consideration towards providing **school-based** professional wellbeing, mental health and education support for **all Northern Territory students.**
 - to build school and system capacity in the area of student wellbeing. **These are not alternatives to the School Counselling Service**, but complementary and whole school approaches.”
2. **Under the Remote Secondary Education Initiative**, the then Department of Education submitted to the Department of the Chief Minister, Family Violence Partnership Program, a proposal to employ Indigenous Counsellors in selected remote schools **(NT 2005).**

Primary schools were not allocated services, although: there was widespread support for the appointment of qualified school counsellors in all primary and secondary schools **(NT 2005).**

3. The work of School Counsellors was highlighted in the **April 2007** report of the Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse: **Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle - “Little Children are Sacred”.**

“Little Children are Sacred” emphasised the importance of empowerment and self-determination, and community-based education. The Inquiry noted the great strength in the work of School Counsellors, not only in individual and family counselling, but consultancy with teachers and school-community development. The Inquiry was also impressed with the work of School Counsellors but, unfortunately, they were few and far between. These counsellors work closely with the children as well as teachers and are able to give constructive advice to teachers in dealing with perhaps difficult Aboriginal children or those facing family problems.



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'The work of these counsellors is invaluable in assisting the learning and understand (sic) between pupil, the school community and teachers. They are essential to providing quality professional assistance to Aboriginal children experiencing difficulties. All schools should have access to a school counsellor. Some schools could share a counsellor or a counsellor could service two to three schools in close proximity to each other.'

Recommendation 52c: **appoint 20 additional school counsellors** to service those schools currently without such counsellors i.e. the major remote towns, the town camps in the regional centres, and one in each group school (i.e. those schools in remote areas which supply services to a number of smaller schools in the area).

4. In **2010** there were 26 School Counsellors, despite an expectation that there would be 29 with the addition of 10 under Closing the Gap (NT. DEET 2008).
5. **Gone Too Soon: A Report into Youth Suicide in the Northern Territory (Gone Too Soon, 2012)** documented the efforts of agencies and communities to support and strengthen young people, and recommended linked-up services more likely to identify and meet need.

Recommendations included increased numbers of School Counsellors to allow adequate provision of service.

Evidence presented by the Northern Territory Coroner stated the importance of young people being able to access a counsellor attached to schools "where they have to go" ... "there on the ground" (p.122).

Northern Territory Police, on the basis of feedback from Youth Engagement Police Officers and school students, also suggested that an increased number of counsellors might "reduce potential harmful outcomes" (p.123).

6. **A Legislative Assembly Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the Northern Territory** presented their report in March **2012**. The Assembly was motivated by the individual, family and community pain and devastation that accompanied suicides, especially those of young people.

The youth suicide rate was 3.5 times the national average. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people represented 75% of child suicides, and 50% of all suicides.

The Northern Territory Department of Education and Training acknowledged the need for counsellors to be available in primary schools, but these were only provided where middle and senior School Counsellors had "the capacity" (p.123).



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The Chief Executive Officer, NT DET, said that in remote areas in particular, there was a need for: more social workers, more counsellors, people with that dedicated experience to ensure the kids have the wellbeing and strategies so that they can take advantage of their schooling. He thought that **a further 20-30 full-time counsellor positions would be required** in order for the department to adopt a more holistic approach to the education of young people (p.124).

Recommendation #9 of the **2012** Gone Too Soon report reads:

The Committee recommends that the Department of Education and Training determine an optimum ratio of students per school counsellor for primary schools, middle schools and high schools and allocate counsellors on that basis.

7. 30 June **2017**, there were 19 School Counsellors and 5 vacancies.
8. 12 May **2023**, very few School Counsellors for NT schools.
9. 12 May **2023**, there are only 3 School Counsellors for Darwin with a total of 10,226 students in 24 schools. If you were to consider only middle and high schools (and we shouldn't) that's only 3 School Counsellors travelling out to 6 schools with 4,031 students.

What does access to School Counsellors look like in the other regions across the NT?

10. February **2022** Figures from the Productivity Commission show the Northern Territory suicide rate among those aged 5 to 17 more than double that of the next highest jurisdiction.

Tabby Fudge
President

The Northern Territory Council of Government School Organisations represents every NT government school with over 19,000 families, their 34,000 children and the school communities that support them.

CONTACT

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