

**Submission  
No 79**

## **INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

**Organisation:** Australian Association of Social Workers

**Date Received:** 30 October 2020

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29<sup>th</sup> October 2020

Portfolio Committee No. 3 – Education  
Parliament of New South Wales  
6 Macquarie Street,  
Sydney, NSW 2000

Dear the Hon. Mark Latham,

**Re: Review of the New South Wales School Curriculum**

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing over 13,000 social workers throughout Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work and have a strong voice on matters of social inclusion, social justice, human rights and issues that impact on the quality of life of all Australians. The NSW branch represents more than 3,000 members across the state, many of whom work with children and young people. Our members are employed in a range of roles in government departments, non-government organisations and in private practice in areas including child protection, family violence, health, mental health, justice, housing and homelessness, disability, aged care, and school, along with other disadvantaged individuals, families and communities.

Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally. At the very minimum, the academic qualifications that applicants to the AASW are required to hold are: a Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Social Work with Honours, or a Social Work Qualifying Master's degree. The curriculum provides professional social work education addressing education, knowledge, skills and values that can be applied across the diverse range of practice settings, fields of practice and methods of social work practice, and includes an extensive period of field education. Graduates of AASW-accredited social work courses are eligible for membership of the AASW. In addition, some social workers are eligible for a range of credentials, such as Accredited Mental Health Social Workers, Accredited Clinical Social Workers, and Accredited Family Violence Social Workers., demonstrating their expertise and commitment to continuing professional development

School social work is a well-established specialist area of social work practice and an example of the unique contribution that social work can make to the mental wellbeing of young people.

School social workers have been employed in Australian schools for more than 65 years and in UK and US schools for more than a century. We have consulted with members who have extensive experience working with young people in schools and in other settings, and we would like to provide comments on number 3c of the Terms of Reference.

*Whether and to what extent schools should be involved in the 'social and emotional development' of students, as per the Melbourne/Alice Springs Declarations, and growing popularity of 'wellbeing programs' in NSW schools*

AASW members share the widely held view amongst the community that promoting the social and emotional development of students is a central role of education. Despite this, there is no consistent approach to students' social and emotion wellbeing in NSW schools. One example of this inconsistency is that there is a wide variation in the provision of direct counselling support services across the state. Religious affiliated schools and private schools adopt various approaches to student wellbeing depending on levels of funding provided and their underpinning philosophies. Currently, the NSW government utilises the 'Wellbeing framework for schools' as a toolkit to provide an overarching strategy to assess student wellbeing in public schools. We agree that the successful implementation of this framework would require the recruitment of qualified professionals to work with students and the school communities. The NSW Ombudsman and the Productivity Commission's draft report "The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health" continue to highlight that suicide is the leading cause of death for Australian young people under the age of 24 years.<sup>12</sup> Schools play a significant role in providing services to young people with mental disorders & in 40% of cases school staff were the first to identify emotional or behavioural problems in young people.<sup>3</sup> The absence of a consistent approach is undermining the delivery of services for children who are experiencing suicidal ideation and mental health conditions.

Among mental health professions, the person-in-environment approach of school social work is unique. It maintains a dual focus on the student and on the school environment in order to facilitate successful learning outcomes through the relief of distress, the removal of barriers or inequities, and the development of a safe and inclusive school and community. School social work is a vast area of practice that responds to the needs of the student population and school community. Most importantly, in their commitment to human rights and social justice, school social workers advocate for the rights of students against the discrimination and reduced

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Productivity Commission 2019, "Draft Report : Mental Health", accessed 29<sup>th</sup> Oct 2020, <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/draft/mental-health-draft-volume2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> NSW Ombudsman 2019, "Review of suicide clusters and evidence-based prevention strategies for school-aged children", accessed 29<sup>th</sup> Oct 2020, < [https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0015/71241/Review-of-Suicide-clusters-and-evidence-based-prevention-strategies-for-school-aged-children.pdf](https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/71241/Review-of-Suicide-clusters-and-evidence-based-prevention-strategies-for-school-aged-children.pdf)>

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence, D., Johnson, S., Hafekost, J., Boterhoven de Haan, K., Sawyer, M., Ainley, J. and Zubrick, S.R., 2015. *The mental health of children and adolescents: Report on the second Australian child and adolescent survey of mental health and wellbeing*, Commonwealth of Australia

opportunities they can sometimes experience. They can assist teachers in the analysis of student difficulties with learning and behaviours, and make recommendations for teaching, learning and curriculum modification, individualised support, behaviour management, student groupings and classroom environments. They offer transition preparation and support for children beginning primary school or graduating to secondary school and tertiary education. Their expertise in program design, management and implementation make them skilled at creating inclusive and affirming organisational environments for all, especially students with complex interacting needs. Many social workers also have expertise in organisational leadership and management.

The AASW welcomes the NSW government's budget commitment to additional mental health practitioners including social workers in schools and believes it is critical that they are employed in a capacity that enables them to use the full extent of their knowledge and skills, in providing evidence-based and robust interventions to vulnerable students and their families. The Victorian Government has currently supplemented its School Social Work workforce and rolled out a state-wide student wellbeing program that includes social workers as key personnel.

Therefore, the AASW makes the following recommendations:

1. That the NSW government consider the Victorian initiative as a blueprint and create the role of school social workers, to be filled by qualified social workers who will be remunerated accordingly
2. That every NSW school with a student population beyond 500 should be allocated, or required to employ at least 1 School Social Worker to promote the well-being of students and provide therapeutic interventions for students who need them.<sup>4</sup>

Thank you for taking the time to consider these recommendations. We would be delighted to meet with you to discuss them in more detail. If you have any inquiries, please feel free to contact Ms Jane Berkley, NSW Branch Service Coordinator, via [\[redacted\]](#) or/and Charles Chu, AASW Social Policy and Advocacy Officer, via [\[redacted\]](#)

**Yours sincerely,**

**David Keegan**  
**NSW Branch President**

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<sup>4</sup> The case for this has been argued by the Productivity Commission's report referred to