Mr David McKie  
Director, Student Welfare  
NSW Department of Education and Communities  
Locked Bag 53  
Darlinghurst NSW 1300

Dear Mr McKie

I am writing in response to your letter of 6 October 2011 inviting the Commission to make a submission to the review of counselling services available to students in NSW Government schools.

It is clear from a number of sources that there is a current significant under-supply of school counsellors in NSW Government schools and that this limits student access to counselling services and detracts from the quality of the service that can be provided. In the interests of student wellbeing the Commission supports a substantial improvement in the number of counsellors in NSW.

However, in a context of limited real resources we acknowledge the need for a clearly defined role for school counsellors and approaches to the delivery of services that might achieve a more equitable distribution of services across the state.

Another critical concern is that counselling services need to be promoted and delivered in ways that suit children and young people so that they are fully utilised and as effective as possible.

The role of school counsellors
In the Commission’s view two core functions for school counsellors are to:

1. Promote and deliver mental health initiatives with a preventative focus across the school community
2. Provide a qualified and accessible first point of contact for the support of children in the school setting and assess and refer children (where necessary) to relevant health and welfare services outside the school setting.

The NSW Suicide Prevention Strategy 2010-2015 highlights schools as a critical location in identifying risks to children and providing pathways to care and support. The Child Death Review Team (CDRT) Annual Report 2009 also recognised the importance of school mental health services in addressing student distress and preventing suicide and made a number of recommendations in this regard.

The Child Death Review Team Annual Report 2009 indicates that of the seventeen children who died in 2009, twelve had experienced enduring difficulties including mental illness, severe family dysfunction and school-related difficulties. Seven of
these children had a personal history of mental or behavioural disorders or psychological distress or trauma. Twelve of these young people were attending secondary school, while three had left school early, in Year 9. The most common difficulties identified by the Team related to education and schooling. These included problems related to education and literacy (7), including five children and young people who had been suspended or expelled from school, underachievement (4), problems related to school bullying (2), educational maladjustment and discord with teachers (3), problems with peer relationships at school (2) and final year exam stress (2). Several of these young people had contact with the school counsellor. At the time of reporting, seven children were identified as informing friends or a family member of their intention to suicide.

The Team noted that providing assistance to children, including those children who attend school is complex. The child’s family, friends, teachers, school counsellors and health professionals all have a role to play including passing on concerns they may have to an appropriate person. This can be challenging for peers and they need to know what to do, who to tell and be supported to do so. To address this, the Team recommended:

“1: That in achieving Outcome 3.2 (i) of the Suicide Prevention Strategy 2010-2015 - Educate communities to identify and respond to warning signs, tipping points and imminent risk factors associated with suicide, that the NSW Government consider the range of communication mediums used by children to inform peers of their intention to suicide.

2: As part of its work to achieve strategic direction 2 - ‘Building individual resilience and the capacity for self help’, and strategic direction 3 - ‘Improving community awareness, strength, resilience and capacity in suicide prevention’ of the Suicide Prevention Strategy 2010-2015 that the NSW Government revise and update the resources used by schools to support the management of student distress and planned suicide. This work should include advice on the importance of peers passing on concerns they have about peer intention to suicide.

3: That in achieving Outcome 3.3 (iii) of the Suicide Prevention Strategy 2010-2015 - Expand the resource capacity of schools, workplaces and other relevant settings to identify and support those at risk, the NSW Government identify the barriers to referral between schools and specialists youth mental health services and develop effective and efficient services linkage.”

Allocation and delivery of counselling services

The way services are allocated and delivered needs to be examined in light of acknowledged shortages in the number of school counsellors, their uneven distribution across the state and doubts about the current capacity of school counselling services to respond effectively to the diversity of the student body.

We urge the review to examine models that could provide greater access for children to a greater range of school counsellors and thereby give children some choice about the age, gender and background of the counsellor they might use.
For example, consideration might be given to:

- Examining the feasibility of establishing a panel of counsellors that work across schools in a particular local government area or region and from which students (and parents and schools) could choose the counsellor(s) that best meet their needs
- Using technology (for example video-conferencing or mobile devices) to provide access to counselling services in areas where the supply of counsellors is low, distances large or this is preferred by the child or young person
- Providing dedicated travel budgets for counsellors to attend face to face meetings with children, families and schools across the areas they cover
- Recruiting counsellors from a more diverse range of backgrounds
- Investing more in the ongoing support and training counsellors receive and ensuring that they are equipped with the latest diagnostic tools and other resources.

_Making school counselling services work for children and young people_

Surveys suggest that school counsellors in NSW may not be used as frequently or comprehensively as they might be.

The NSW School Student’s Health Behaviours Survey provides information about the people children turn to for help when they are distressed. In 2008, one in three students did not speak with anyone about their distress. When they did they were most likely to talk to their family or friends, followed by teachers or school counsellors. Perhaps not surprisingly, a greater proportion of students spoke with teachers or school counsellors when they had study problems (10.9%), closely followed by students who were in trouble because of their behaviour (6.7%), students who experienced feelings of nervousness or stress or pressure (6.0%) and students who experienced feelings of unhappiness or sadness or depression (5.6%).

The National Survey of Young Australians, published by Mission Australia in 2010, reports on young people’s self-identified sources of advice and support. This survey indicates that in 2010, 8.5% of young people identified school counsellors as a source of advice and support.

In relation to what encourages children to use a counselling service, the Child Death Review Team’s publication, _Suicide and Risk Taking Deaths of Children and Young People_, found that just under half of the children and young people who died had no record of contact with human services agencies. This report identified a number of factors that encourage young people to seek help, including “feeling safe and comfortable to approach a support person, feeling confident that their privacy will be respected and confidentiality ensured [and] feeling confident they will be listened to” (Child Death Review Team: 2003: 118).

The literature also identifies a number of other factors that children and young people value in a counselling service. This suggests that counselling should ideally:

- be caring, non-judgemental and genuine
- be provided by young staff
- relate to young people
- be easily accessed in time of need
• explain and gives appropriate information
• take further effective action, including making an appropriate referral.

In short, school counselling services need to be provided in ways that suit children and young people. This can be informed by the literature on school counselling (and particularly Australian sources which identify student views about the type of counselling service they would like to receive) and through direct consultation with children and young people themselves. In this regard, I am very pleased that the review will be consulting directly with children and young people and that the Department and Commission have already been working together on this.

I would also recommend that the Department regularly evaluate school counselling services and that the views of children and young people, including those who have used counselling services, be an integral part of this evaluation.

I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry and am interested in continued involvement, including having the opportunity to comment on the report that will arise from the findings of the review and its recommendations.

For further communications on this matter, the contact person is Mr Gregor Macfie, Director Policy and Research on (02) 9286 7243 or at Gregor.Macfie@kids.nsw.gov.au.

Yours sincerely

Megan Mitchell
Commissioner
4 November 2011