

VICTORIA

Victorian
Auditor-General

Audit summary of The Effectiveness of Student Wellbeing Programs and Services

Tabled in Parliament
3 February 2010

Audit summary

Introduction

Student wellbeing affects most aspects of students' functioning at school and is an important factor that affects learning and development outcomes. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) has defined student wellbeing as '*...a sustainable positive mood and attitude, health, resilience, and satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences at school*'. While wellbeing is critical to student development and success, it is difficult to clearly define and determine how much various factors affect it.

DEECD has a long history of providing student wellbeing programs and services, guided by a range of policy and planning documents. In 2009–10, DEECD budgeted \$116.3 million for student wellbeing programs and services. Schools also plan, fund and deliver a range of student wellbeing programs and services.

Student wellbeing programs and services can be broadly categorised as professional support, including psychologists, youth workers and social workers, nursing, and other health and welfare related staff.

The objective of this audit was to assess whether DEECD's student wellbeing programs and services are effective. We assessed three major programs and services—Student Support Services Program (SSSP), Primary Welfare Officer Initiative (PWOI) and Secondary School Nursing Program (SSNP). The audit covered DEECD's central office, three regional offices and two case study schools.

Conclusions

While DEECD's performance data indicates that student wellbeing is improving overall, it has only recently commenced actions to determine the effectiveness of its programs and services on student wellbeing. Particular gaps we found that are now being addressed by DEECD are:

- the lack of a comprehensive and up-to-date overarching policy framework for student wellbeing
- inadequate measurement of the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services.

No clear and current overarching policy framework for student wellbeing

Multiple stakeholders deliver DEECD's student wellbeing programs and services. In this complex operational environment, it is important that the main stakeholders for each program and service share a common vision of student wellbeing.

DEECD's 1998 Framework for Student Support Services sets out its key policies and principles, accountability measures and targets for student wellbeing. However, it does not constitute a comprehensive and up-to-date, overarching framework that links DEECD's current student wellbeing objectives with the goals and objectives of related programs and services, and the expected outcomes for student wellbeing. Moreover, there is no single document that integrates all of DEECD's student wellbeing programs and services and shows how, for example, school nurses, student welfare coordinators and student support service officers align with other wellbeing staff in schools.

A sound policy framework should also include a process of continuous improvement. A substantial amount of wellbeing-related survey data is collected from students, parents and school staff. However, there is no evidence that this data, or the results of program and service evaluations, is being used to drive a planned and systematic program of continuous improvement. There is also scope for research and best practice to be shared more effectively across regions, including information about what is and is not working in schools.

Inadequate measurement of the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services

The main sources of data on student wellbeing are the Attitudes to School Survey (ATSS), and attendance data collected from schools.

The results from the ATSS indicate that student wellbeing has improved between 2006 and 2009. It also shows that primary school students have a higher level of wellbeing than secondary students, and that the gap between the two school types has remained around the same level over the four-year period for which comparative data was available. Our analysis also revealed that wellbeing declines as a cohort moves from the primary school system into and through the secondary school system. While these situations may be expected, DEECD needs to monitor wellbeing levels between schools and explore opportunities for redressing any gaps.

There has been no significant change in attendance rates between 2006 and 2008, with average attendance remaining constant at about 92 per cent. However, mean absent days per student increased marginally between 2006 and 2008.

DEECD has not established a link between the ATSS results or attendance data, and the student wellbeing programs and services being delivered. Further, the limited number of targets or benchmarks makes it difficult to determine whether the results achieved in student wellbeing, and more specifically student wellbeing programs and services, are meeting DEECD's expectations, and are providing value for money.

While the *State of Victoria's Children* report is not designed to measure the effectiveness of DEECD's programs and services, it provides a source of information upon which to base the planning of programs and services. However, it is difficult to draw a clear conclusion about student wellbeing from the data presented in the report as some indicators show improvement while others show negative trends.

Without robust data on program and service effectiveness it is hard to determine whether student wellbeing trends are the result of planned activities, other external influences, or general population trends. The lack of such data also undermines the reliability of decisions on resource allocations.

Planned improvements to DEECD's outcomes and evaluation processes

More positively, DEECD is undertaking extensive work in three areas that can help measure the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services:

- **Health and Wellbeing Service Framework (HWSF)**—The HWSF will include a set of agreed measurable outcomes for program and service performance.
- **Outcomes and Evaluation Framework**—DEECD has recently developed this framework to better measure whether it is achieving its outcomes and goals.
- **Student Support Services Program (SSSP)**—Planned revisions to the SSSP include introducing new accountability and performance reporting arrangements that will include impact and service provision data. DEECD plans to roll out these new arrangements in 2010, however, for one region we visited there is a risk that service delivery demands may prevent it from delivering the planned service revisions as intended and within the required time frames.
- **Secondary School Nursing Program (SSNP)**—DEECD has commenced implementation of the recommendations from the 2009 review of the SSNP. This includes strategies to strengthen the quality, delivery and management of the program.

Given the extensive resources allocated annually to improving student wellbeing, DEECD needs to implement and purposely drive these frameworks and service revisions.

Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Page
	DEECD should:	
1.	Include in its Health and Wellbeing Service Framework: • clearly defined overall student health and wellbeing outcomes • descriptions of how programs and services relate to and affect each other, and how their delivery across relevant agencies will be coordinated.	10
2.	Apply its Outcomes and Evaluation Framework to monitor, evaluate and review the effectiveness of its student wellbeing programs and services, and drive continuous improvement.	23
3.	Continue to actively monitor the differences in wellbeing levels across all primary and secondary schools and explore opportunities to redress the gaps between schools, including identifying and disseminating better practices adopted by schools.	23