

28 June 2023

The Secretary
Social Development Committee
Parliament of South Australia
GPO Box 572, Adelaide 5001

Submitted via email to sdcc@parliament.sa.gov.au

Dear Members of the Social Development Committee,

Inquiry into Petition No. 96 of 2021 to the South Australian Government: Funding for children and students with additional learning needs in public schools and preschools

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Parliament of South Australia Inquiry into Petition No. 96 about funding for children and students with additional learning needs in public schools and preschools.

At the APS, our core mission revolves around enhancing the wellbeing of all in our society. We are informed by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which champion inclusivity, social equity, and the empowerment of marginalised and vulnerable groups¹. By advocating on behalf of our members and the community, we strive to bring about meaningful reforms in Australian health and social policies and systems. Our overarching objective is to ensure equitable access for all to quality, evidence-based services that promote health and well-being through proactive measures, prevention, early intervention and treatment.

The APS understands that Petition No. 96 requests the South Australian Government to urgently increase funding to public preschools and schools to provide immediate support and intervention for children and students with additional learning needs through the employment of more support staff, specialists and allied health (including mental health) professionals and teachers².

We understand that this request is made on the basis of concerns raised by petitioners that children and students with additional learning needs are not adequately supported in South Australian schools. The petition states that schools and preschools are currently not adequately funded to provide in-class/group support and intervention for students with additional learning needs and must apply for additional funding for each child. As cited in the petition, teachers and leaders report that only 9% of these applications are funded at the level requested, and some children are waiting more than 2 years to get assessed by a specialist causing significant delays to intervention and support².

The APS is a strong advocate for increased investment in the early years and school settings (e.g.,³⁻⁷) to ensure optimal learning and development for all children and young people. Education and early learning play a critical role in equipping children and young people with the necessary skills and knowledge needed to navigate and excel in life⁸. However, children who experience educational challenges are often caught up in a cumulative downward spiral that undermines their learning, engagement, relationships, and psychosocial health – and in turn, they fall even further behind their peers academically. Poor educational success persists into adulthood and is associated with increased risks of unemployment, poverty, poor physical and mental health and lower life expectancy e.g.,^{9,10}.

The evidence is extensive and clear that lifelong success is rooted in the early learning and school years, and investing in these formative periods yields substantial benefits for individuals, families, communities and national economies (e.g.,^{11–13}). The Productivity Commission's 2020 Mental Health Inquiry Report and the National Mental Health Commission's National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy emphasise the critical role of educational settings, in collaboration with family, community, and the broader service system, in supporting the learning, wellbeing and mental health of children and young people.

We highlight the importance of schools investing in evidence-based whole-school frameworks for student learning and wellness and demonstrate how psychologists, as experts in learning and development, are an essential workforce in schools to lead and coordinate safe and effective interventions and support for children and for educators.

We also recommend to the Committee, our [APS Psychologists in Schools Position Statement](#), which provides more details about our call for more school-based psychologists to coordinate and deliver learning, developmental and mental health supports in schools to ensure that our children and young people are able to thrive.

Timely intervention is essential for children with additional learning needs

The APS strongly advocates for the implementation of evidence-based whole-school, multi-tiered approaches to addressing learning, developmental and mental health and wellbeing concerns in schools. Improved educational outcomes for all students is associated with sustained whole-school approaches that have internally coordinated tiers of health promotion, targeted prevention, and early intervention support and the ability to connect with families, external and community support systems as and when needed^{14–17}. Whole-school approaches also prompt schools to address policies, procedures and practices that can address the barriers and enablers for all learners in classrooms.

Optimal learning and development for some students, however, can only be achieved with timely access to experts and supports within the school community who can work collaboratively with all key stakeholders in a child's life including teachers, family, and community supports. This includes but is not limited to students with diverse needs who can benefit from additional learning and developmental support, such as students with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse students, gifted and talented students, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and students with mental, behavioural, or neurodevelopmental conditions (e.g.,^{18,19}). Attention should be given to early education and school-based approaches that are culturally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (e.g.,^{20–22}).

It is essential, therefore, to provide sufficient funding and resources to enable the implementation of inclusive practices, personalised interventions, and support services that can set these students on the path to success, leading to improved academic outcomes, social-emotional development, long-term societal benefits, as well as compliance with legal and ethical obligations for inclusive education.

Psychologists in schools are an investment in safe, effective support for South Australia children and their educators.

We acknowledge the complex role of teachers who must manage diverse classrooms with students of varying learning abilities and individual circumstances, catering to their unique needs while maintaining an inclusive learning environment, and deploying specialised strategies, accommodations, or modifications for students with additional learning needs.

It is important to recognise, however, that while teachers possess a wide range of skills and expertise, they can greatly benefit from the support and guidance of other on-site professionals, including psychologists. A recent report from the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) revealed that teachers inconsistently utilise evidence-based practices and sometimes employ unsupported teaching methods, but that increased collaboration, allocated time for evidence-based practices, and professional learning opportunities, including coaching, enhance the adoption of evidence-based practices²³.

Psychologists are well placed to provide invaluable insights, resources, and training to help teachers effectively navigate the complexities of the classroom and further enhance their instructional practices, ultimately leading to better outcomes for all students, including at-risk students²⁴. The importance of deploying sufficient numbers of trained psychological professionals in schools was recognised in the final report of the Federal Parliament's Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention²⁵.

Psychologists are AHPRA-regulated professionals who must demonstrate competence in the delivery of safe, evidence-based care that spans prevention, assessment, intervention, planning and consultation. The required competencies and standards are set by the Psychology Board of Australia for general psychologists and those with an Area of Practice Endorsement (AoPE) such as educational and developmental, counselling and clinical psychology. Specifically, psychologists have the training and skills to support teachers and schools by⁷:

- Partnering with teachers to address the classroom impacts of student learning difficulties, behavioural problems, neurodevelopmental (e.g., ASD and ADHD) and mental health conditions,
- Training and coaching school staff and leaders to address systemic issues and deliver whole school learning and well-being approaches,
- Delivering targeted early intervention and direct intervention supports for students and families, and
- Coordinating supports for students with more complex developmental and learning needs.
- Providing expert advice to school leaders about evidence-based programs and practices that are suitable for the specific school context and maximise return-on-investment.

Estimates are however that there is only about one school psychologist to every 1500 students, although this varies across jurisdictions, schools sectors and individual schools²⁶. This workforce ratio prevents many existing psychologists based in schools from working to their full scope of practice as described above. With high numbers of students to serve, school psychologists' often find themselves spending most of their time intervening with individual students with complex needs rather than also using their skills to work with school personnel on whole-school approaches that promote the learning and holistic development of every child and early intervention for students who are struggling.

An opportunity for South Australia to rapidly deploy more psychologists in schools

The APS commends the South Australia Government on the school-based mental health service that was launched earlier this year after a successful pilot for 65 of the most disadvantaged high schools. We understand that fifty-five school-based mental health practitioners, including psychologists, and an additional forty-five learning support specialists are to be employed. We also note the challenges that have been reported about filling these roles²⁷. The APS confirms that the Australian psychological workforce is in increasingly short supply, particularly in regional and rural areas. Estimates are that Australia has only 35% of the required psychology workforce.

The APS has solutions for quickly unlocking and growing a South Australian school psychology workforce that could help to support the mental health and learning needs of students.

The number of fully trained psychologists available to work in schools could be scaled up within a short time frame of 2-3 years – with the right investment in postgraduate university training, sponsored school placements (particularly in rural and remote areas) and quality professional supervision. Investment in intern psychologists in schools can deliver immediate benefits for addressing the additional learning, behavioural and mental health support needs of identified students, but also the offer the opportunity to increase the student to psychologist ratio to enable psychologists to work to their full scope of practice and ensure future workforce supply of psychologists with school experience in early learning, primary and secondary school contexts⁷.

With judicious South Australian government support, AHPRA-registered provisional psychologists could immediately take up the proposed mental health practitioner roles in schools and support the expansion of mental health care to South Australian schools. Given their qualifications, skills and ongoing professional supervision and learning, provisionally registered psychologists are ideally placed to work safely and effectively in South Australian schools.

As they transition to general registration, South Australian schools would then have available a workforce pipeline of psychologists with contemporary experience who are ready, willing, and able to continue in school-based mental health practitioner roles.

The APS provides a Board-approved supervisor training program, and with the right support, is in a position to train hundreds of psychology supervisors over a period of two years who could work in the education system to increase the psychology workforce pipeline. Thus, the APS can support the South Australia Government by offering a centralised training infrastructure which can:

- Ensure that participants can deliver the service needed in the area, to the highest possible safety standards
- Access supervision when needed, aligned with location requirements
- Access Board-approved resources, supervisor training and support structures

We note that individual South Australian schools are able to decide how best to use the Student Wellbeing Boost to support their students, which could include engaging extra school professionals such as psychologists or hosting activities and initiatives that support mental health²⁸. We argue that the best return on investment for these funds would be to employ more psychologists in schools who can support students and advise schools on evidence-based programs and initiatives to improve learning outcomes.

Education is a vital tool in equipping and supporting young people for success in life. By addressing disparities in educational success by ensuring timely interventions for those students with additional learning needs, the South Australian Government can pave the way for better educational outcomes to promote the holistic development of every child and ensure lifelong wellbeing.

If any further information is required from the APS, I would be happy to be contacted through the national office on (03) 8662 3300 or by email at z.burgess@psychology.org.au

Yours sincerely

Dr Zena Burgess, FAPS FAICD
Chief Executive Officer

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