

Guidance counsellors key to positive outcomes

PPTA walked away from consultation on the Children's Action Plan after it threatened to thrust 44 pages of unrealistic standards between school staff and vulnerable children (see *PPTA News* November/December 2015 page 6). This month we look at one of the places resources should be going – guidance counselling in schools.

School counsellors are in the unique position of being able to safely offer young people a voice – yet they desperately need resources, says New Zealand Association of Counsellors spokesperson Sarah Maindonald.

A 2013 Education Review Office (ERO) report on improving guidance counselling for students in secondary schools showed a large number of vulnerable young people chose school counsellors as their first port of call.

Part of the prime minister's Youth Mental Health Project, the study evaluated 44 schools and five wharekura and showed students were likely to see a school counsellor when faced with family violence or mental health issues.

"It was where they went when they needed care and protection," Sarah said.

A point of difference for school counselling was that it provided advice and support a young person could easily access in their own environment.

School counsellors also worked with families and helped get around barriers such as transport and childcare for parents that visiting social workers could put up.

"They can access the resource within their community," she said.

Despite this, funding for guidance counselling in secondary schools was inequitable – particularly in very small or very large schools, Sarah said.

It particularly disadvantaged kura kaupapa because they were generally much smaller, she said.

"In the 90s counselling was part of



Sarah Maindonald, New Zealand Association of Counsellors spokesperson

a counsellor. It is an advocacy service for children," she said.

Since a number of schools now ran from years 7 to 13, Sarah believed the Ministry of Education should at least fund counselling for years 7 and 8.

ERO's review into guidance counselling made a number of recommendations including reviewing the guidance staffing entitlement to ensure funding better aligns with roll size and targeted professional development for school leaders and people working in counselling roles.

A working party had been put together following the review but it only met once in 2014. After a year's break, which caused some concern, it met again in January this year and a second meeting is planned for this month.

The overall feeling from this group was that they were supportive of the ERO recommendations, "but whether or not there will be any funding to do anything, time will tell," Sarah said.

"These kids need resources, more counsellors, more teacher aides, social workers. They are some of our most vulnerable and they need that," she said.

PPTA president Angela Roberts said areas such as guidance counselling in schools were where government resources should be directed, rather than box-ticking compliance exercises.

"Staff understanding global policy and national legislation isn't going to help our vulnerable children, funding services that actually help protect them will," she said.

“ If a child is in a class of 25 they are not going to speak out, but they will to a counsellor.”

the staffing formula but since tomorrow's schools there is nothing – boards can do what they like.”

The system was still an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff for many though, with little support for counselling prior to secondary school, Sarah said.

She advocated more resources going into counselling early in a child's life because a counsellor was someone a child could go to if they wanted to speak out.

"Often it's the child the breaks these cycles rather than the family.

"If a child is in a class of 25 they are not going to speak out, but they will to