



SUBMISSION

to the

Ministry of Health

on

**A Strategy to Prevent Suicide in New Zealand –
Draft for public consultation**

June 2017

1. About PPTA

PPTA represents the majority of teachers engaged in secondary education in New Zealand, including secondary teachers, principals, and manual and technology teachers.

Under our constitution, all PPTA activity is guided by the following objectives:

1. To advance the cause of education generally and of all phases of secondary and technical education in particular;
2. To uphold and maintain the just claims of its members individually and collectively; and
3. To affirm and advance Te Tiriti O Waitangi.

Under the first of these objectives, PPTA takes a considerable interest in matters concerning the wellbeing of students.

Our Rainbow Taskforce, which is PPTA's advisory group of LGBTI+ members , provides professional learning to teachers, at the request of principals, on ways to promote the wellbeing of LGBTI+ students, and this includes alerting teachers to the considerable evidence of the poorer average wellbeing of these students, including their greater risk of suicide.

We are aware that Māori and Pasifika students also have greater risk of suicide. Part of our response to this is to promote culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogies in New Zealand schools.

We look after the industrial and professional interests of school guidance counsellors, and have been working for many years to persuade government to increase the pastoral and guidance staffing allocation and ensure that all guidance counsellors are fully qualified so that schools can comprehensively meet the needs of their troubled teenagers.

2. Bullying

New Zealand's rate of bullying in schools brings us no credit. Repeated TIMSS (Trends in International Maths and Science Study) reports have shown New Zealand well below the OECD average on the safety of its students. The 2015 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) round showed New Zealand as having the second highest level of student reports of bullying across the countries participating in the study: "Just over a quarter of students reported that they experienced at least one type of bullying 'a few times a month' or more" (<https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/pisa-2015-new-zealand-students-wellbeing-report>, p.5).

The PISA report shows that students who have a weaker sense of belonging at school are more likely to be victims of bullying. We would argue that LGBTI+ students, and students from ethnic groups that are in the minority in that school or community, and students with special education needs, are more likely to experience that weaker sense of belonging.

The connection between bullying experiences and suicidality is well-established, and the Youth 2012 study showed that for both LGB and transgender students, their rates of victimisation from bullying and for a range of mental health statistics including self-harm, significant depression, and attempted suicide were higher than for non LGB or transgender students.

However, PPTA does not believe that schools themselves should take all the blame for this. New Zealand has an appalling record of domestic violence including violence to children and in the presence of children. We also have high levels of inequality by OECD standards, and this means more young people living in poverty and relative deprivation. In addition, schools are not well served by the Ministry of Education with guidance or resourcing on monitoring and eliminating bullying. There is virtually no teacher professional development available about this, except what PPTA delivers on LGBTI+ students (at our own cost, with no charge to the school).

3. LGBTI+ students in New Zealand schools

The series of Youth 2000 surveys by Auckland University Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences Adolescent Health Research Group are an invaluable source of information about LGBTI+ students in New Zealand secondary schools. Surveys in 2001 and 2007 asked students about sexual attraction, and found significant numbers of lesbian, gay and bisexual students. The data on their mental health and wellbeing, including suicidality, makes very depressing reading.

The next study, in 2012, also asked whether students identified as transgender. This is believed to have been the first time in the world that a large random sample of secondary school students has been asked such a question. 1.2% of the sample said they were transgender, and another 2.4% were not sure about their gender. The size of this response was surprising to many people, but not to us at PPTA, where we had been fielding inquiries from schools for some years about how to do the best by their transgender students.

The 2012 data treats LGB and transgender students separately, because the two groups can cross each other, for example a student identifying as transgender (M2F) might also identify as lesbian because they are attracted to members of their chosen gender.

The wellbeing statistics for the two groups, however, are remarkably similar and much worse when compared with the rates for non-transgender and non-LGB students:

- About 17% of both groups (compared with 6% of other students) had experienced bullying at least weekly in the last year.
- About 58% of LGB students and 54% of transgender students had felt afraid that someone would hurt them in the last 12 months.
- 58% of LGB students and 45% of transgender students had deliberately self-harmed in the last 12 months. Over 40% of LGB and transgender students had significant depressive symptoms compared with 12% of other students.
- 42% of LGB students and 50% of transgender students had been hit or physically harmed by another person, compared with 32% of other students.
- 20% of LGB and transgender had attempted suicide in the last 12 months, compared with 4% of other students.

What we don't have from any source is accurate data about completed suicides by young LGBTI+ people. In many of these cases, we suspect, the young person was not "out" to anyone, and certainly not to family. We understand that coroners do try to get information from school guidance counsellors as to the history of the young person, but the student may not have talked with them about their sexuality or gender either.

4. Inadequate support for schools by the Ministry of Education

No specific material has been produced for schools by the Ministry of Education to guide them about how to respond to the needs of LGBTI+ students. There are some references to these students in the Sexuality Education Guidelines, revised in 2015, however these guidelines were primarily provided to support the sexuality strand of the Health Education curriculum, not as whole school advice.

The only material for schools that PPTA is aware of is what has been produced by organisations other than the Ministry of Education. This includes the material available on our website, which has included since 2002 a set of guidelines for principals, boards of trustees and teachers, which were updated again in 2017, plus other supplementary material, such as some case studies for teachers and leadership teams to use to consider how well their school is responding, some material on the language of the LGBTI+ area, and a general guide to homophobia and its effects on students.

Other voluntary organisations have produced material, for example Rainbow Youth in Auckland and InsideOut in Wellington. Both groups try to support young people and schools right across the country. They are dependent on sponsorship and donations, and the occasional grant from the Ministry of Education or other government departments.

It is our view that the paucity of support in this area means that some schools will not serve as the protective places for LGBTI+ students that they could be. At the same

time, many schools are trying very hard to improve their work in this area despite the lack of clear guidance from the Ministry of Education.

The Education Review Office, in December 2013, in its report *Improving Guidance and Counselling for Students in Secondary Schools*, recommended to the Ministry of Education that it “review the formula used to calculate the Guidance Staffing Entitlement to ensure this funding better aligns with roll size”. The ERO staff members responsible for the review expressed some surprise to the reference group for the review at their realisation that the Guidance Staffing component of secondary school staffing fails to increase above 2.3 full time-teacher equivalents (FTTE) once a school’s roll reaches 200 students. This means that whether a school has 200 students or 3,500 students, it still receives only 2.3 FTTE for Guidance.

From 1989 to 1995, schools had a “tagged staffing” component for guidance counselling, i.e. staffing that had to be used for that purpose. It was as follows:

- Year 9-13 roll below 400 but above 200: 0.6 FTTE
- Year 9-13 roll 400-899: 1 FTTE
- Year 9-13 roll 900-1199: 1.5 FTTE
- Year 9-13 roll 1200-1399: 2 FTTE
- Year 9-13 roll 1400-1799: 2.5 FTTE
- Year 9-13 roll 1800+: 3 FTTE

However, this tagged formula was abolished in 1995, and schools were left to determine for themselves how much time they should allocate out of their total staffing package to guidance counselling. Inevitably, with all the competing demands in schools for staffing, there is now a wide divergence in the allocation for guidance counselling, and even a divergence in understanding of the importance of trained and qualified guidance counsellors in meeting the mental health and wellbeing needs of students.

PPTA advises schools that the old tagged formula would be less than inadequate, given the increasing pressures on students and on schools. However, a survey we did in 2004 showed that there was at least one school with over 2,000 students which had only 1 guidance counsellor. A more recent survey in 2013 showed little improvement in this, with the range for schools of 1800+ students being 2 to 4 counsellors, with the median at 2.4, less than the tagged formula would have provided. PPTA is even aware of secondary schools which don’t use any of their guidance and pastoral staffing for trained guidance counsellors.

Additionally, there is no guidance and pastoral care staffing allocation for students below Year 9. This means that secondary schools with Year 7 and 8 students are very badly served, and primary and intermediate schools have to use their Operations Funding to hire counsellors. In Christchurch, a number of the school reorganisations after the earthquakes were to shift Year 7 and 8 from intermediates

into secondary schools. Guidance counsellors there report extreme pressures, with the demand for counselling highest among their younger students traumatised by the earthquakes.

We have been part of a group helping the Ministry of Education to produce guidelines for schools on what good guidance and pastoral care systems look like, another of ERO's recommendations in 2013. Work began on the guidelines in early 2016. They have still not been published, and we have not been given a date when they will.

5. The draft Suicide Strategy and LGBTI+ young people

PPTA is disappointed that the draft Suicide Strategy contains so little analysis of the impacts on groups like LGBTI+ young people of social exclusion. The emphasis seems to be largely on supporting people who are in distress and may be at risk of suicide, which we would not deny is important. However, there needs to also be a strong focus on changing the attitudes in society that lead to some groups of people feeling excluded and therefore more likely to experience depression to the degree that they take their own lives.

We are concerned that the authors of the draft do not even seem to be aware of data that does currently exist. For example, footnote 2 identifies a need to have better data about LGBTI people, and we accept that data on these groups is not systematically collected, but there is some data that can be drawn on including the Youth 2000 studies cited above.

PPTA recently asked senior officials in the Ministry of Education to (a) seek further analysis of the Youth 2012 data in relation to the impact of having well qualified guidance counsellors in schools, and (b) commit to participating in funding a new round of the Youth 2000 study. Neither of these requests appears to have been granted, even though they would have helped to expand the information base for policy-making.

The fact that there is no cross-government commitment yet to funding a new round of the Youth 2000 study is deeply disappointing to us. It is now 5 years since the last survey. Three rounds of the survey have been done, in 2001, 2007, and 2012, so commitment to a further round is now overdue.

And even when the survey has been done, there is then a scramble every time to get funding to mine the really rich data it provides. In 2007, Rainbow Youth had to find sponsorship to get an analysis of the survey's data on LGB young people done, because no government department would fund such an analysis. In 2012, the analysis of the internationally unique data on transgender students happened only because some of the Auckland University staff did the work in their own time, and yet this information has been invaluable for us in our work supporting schools as they deal with rapidly increasing numbers of transgender students in schools.

6. Conclusions

PPTA supports the overall vision of the Suicide Strategy, in terms of building positive wellbeing throughout people's lives as well as supporting people in distress.

However, we have yet to be convinced that the worthy vision set out in sections 1 to 10 of the strategy will be followed with decisive action that is capable of making a real difference.

For example, it is easy to write, in Section 1, that "Activities ... could include ... implementing and extending wellbeing programmes in schools" and "schools improving policies around preventing bullying and processes to deal with bullying if it does occur". They could, yes, but will they? PPTA has been pushing for improvements in these areas for many years, and what we have seen is increasing government inertia, constantly rising demands for "evidence" that every dollar spent will produce results, and reduced funding for programmes like School Wide Positive Behaviour for Learning which is supposed to be the Ministry of Education's flagship policy to address bullying.

Recently the Secretary for Education announced that funding had been found for one financial year to allow all schools to access for free NZCER's Wellbeing in Schools survey that allows them to track bullying rates. She then asked the Bullying Prevention Advisory Group whether other groups around the table could fund subsequent years!

We are not convinced that the Suicide Strategy will turn out to be anything but window dressing for a government that doesn't really care enough to fund what needs to be done.