

Dear members of the Select Committee on Estimates 2011-2012,

Thank you for providing the AEU with the opportunity to give a response to the ACT Budget this morning. Following up on the question this morning about mental health services for young people, please find some additional information below.

The AEU has long called for increased resourcing, specialist staff, teacher professional development and student programs for ACT public schools to effectively support students who may be experiencing mental illness such as behavioural disturbance (including angry/aggressive/violent behaviours), emotional disturbance, depression, anxiety or psychosis. Ideally, the individual needs of students should be addressed through programs within their own school. However, the AEU believes that one size does not fit all, therefore we have consistently sought for the range of alternative programs and settings to be enhanced in order to cater for students whose needs are complex and are not able to be met in their mainstream school.

In addition to programs in schools, it is essential that the Government address the shortage of qualified school counsellors (teacher-psychologists). Currently it is a challenge for schools in all jurisdictions to recruit such professionals. Part of the problem relates to the lack of university courses available but the other factor is the lack of professional recognition and competitive salaries for having a dual qualification. Many psychologists find more attractive salaries outside of education. The AEU is very concerned that the Federal Government has decided to extend the School Chaplaincy Program in the recent budget. Instead, students deserve to be able to speak to a qualified school psychologist and currently there are not enough of these professionals in schools. Currently there are 42.5 FTE school counsellors to cover 84 public schools. This represents one school counsellor to every 918 public school students (based on 2011 census figures).

Services such as Headspace are vital in supporting students to gain treatment and support for their mental health issues and therefore continue their education with appropriate, expert support. As stated this morning, the AEU would welcome at least one additional Headspace Centre in the south of Canberra to provide young people with improved access to services.

For a small percentage of students, their mental health issues are preventing them

from accessing education in an effective, ongoing way. This is why the AEU recommends a residential and day mental health care facility for ACT young people. Such models exist at:

- Rivendell at Westmead Hospital in Sydney. As the website states, Rivendell is a joint NSW Department of Health-Department of Education and Training facility that focuses on the psychological health of young people and their families. Rivendell offers both residential and day programs. www.rivendell-s.schools.nsw.edu.au/sws/view/1331345.node.
- Vic Health provides a wide range of services for young people with mental health issues including the Austin Hospital in Melbourne which provides a residential unit. www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/statewide.htm

We trust this information is of assistance.

Regards,

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