

Fact Sheet: Expert Panel Recommendation on Increasing the Number of School Psychologists in ACT Schools

What did the Expert Panel recommend?

In its final report, the Expert Panel on Students with Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviours recommended: *“That ETD increase the number of psychologists/school counsellors (or other professionals with complementary expertise) within schools to meet the ratio of 1:500 students recommended by the Australian Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools Association.”* (Recommendation 10.1, p.134)

What was the ACT Government’s response?

In the ACT Government’s official response to the Expert Panel’s report, the Minister for Education wrote: *“The ACT Government agrees with all recommendations made in the report and will use them to strengthen existing practice and policy.”* (‘Minister’s Forward’, p.3 Expert Panel on Students with Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviour - ACT Government Response)

In a media release from the Minister for Education on November 18 it was reiterated that: *“The ACT Government has agreed or agreed in principle with all 50 of the Panel’s recommendations and will respond through a suite of initiatives.”* (‘Students at the Centre: Expert Panel Report Released’, 18/11/2015)

How many additional school psychologists does the Education & Training Directorate need to employ to meet the Panel’s recommendation?

There are 43,516 students in ACT public schools (as of the August 2015 school census). Therefore, the Education and Training Directorate needs to employ 87 full-time equivalent school psychologists to achieve the Panel’s recommended ratio of 1 school psychologist for every 500 students. The Minister for Education stated in the Legislative Assembly in November that the Directorate currently employs 43.96 full-time equivalent school psychologists as well as nine senior psychologists (who are not school-based), totalling 53. Therefore the Directorate needs to employ 34 additional full-time equivalent school psychologists to achieve a total of 87 and meet the ratio.

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Have any new school psychologists been employed as a result of the recommendation?

No. When asked in November to explain when the 1:500 target would be met, the Education Directorate said “the planning on these initiatives is still being undertaken” (“School counsellors – a third fewer than needed”, Emma Macdonald, *The Canberra Times*, November 19, 2015). There has been no subsequent announcement regarding this planning and as students return for the 2016 school year, no additional psychologists or counsellors have been employed.

Four new full-time equivalent school psychologists were meant to start in ACT schools in 2015 as a result of the new ETD Teaching Staff Enterprise Agreement negotiated between the ACT Government and the Australian Education Union. However, these additional school psychologists have not yet been recruited. When implemented, this will be a small step in the right direction, but will not constitute even partial implementation of the Panel’s recommendation. The Panel referred to the four new school psychologists in their report and then made their recommendation for further action, over and above what was won through the course of enterprise agreement negotiations (p.134).

Can recommendation 10.1 be implemented by increasing the capacity of Network Student Engagement Teams?

No. The Expert Panel made an additional and separate recommendation (10.3, p. 140) about sufficient resourcing for multidisciplinary teams (known as Network Student Engagement Teams). This is an important recommendation that should be implemented but it will not increase the ratio of school psychologists to students, as per recommendation 10.1.

What about the Government’s claims that the psychologist to student ratio in the ACT compares favourably to other jurisdictions?

In March 15, NSW Education Minister, Adrian Piccoli announced a \$167 million package to employ 236 additional staff which will bring the ratio of school psychologists to students down to 1:750. This is considerably better than the current ratio in the ACT which is over 1:800 even when including nine senior psychologists who are not school-based.

The true test of Government policy is whether it is providing appropriate support to schools, educators and students to ensure that the incident that gave rise to the Expert Panel in the first place, doesn’t happen again. The ACT Government appointed the Expert Panel and ostensibly accepted its recommendations. To make a difference in practice, the recommendations must now be implemented.

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How will more school psychologists help ACT students?

The Expert Panel report clearly explains how qualified school psychologists are crucial in ensuring students, particularly those with complex needs, get the support they need. As identified by the panel, school psychologists:

- Provide a therapeutic and evidence-based perspective on student needs
- Are able to assess the cognitive capacities and needs of students
- Work with classroom teachers and others to develop and monitor evidence-based, targeted interventions for these students
- Provide ongoing counselling support to students and their families.

As one school psychologist told *The Canberra Times*: "Kids have trouble engaging in learning for lots of different reasons – they might have a specific learning difficulty or disability, they might be experiencing mental health difficulties, or they might have experiences in their past such as grief, loss, trauma and adversity that make engagement difficult. Our job is to help understand what is going on, and support the student to get the help they need." ('Life on the front line of student psychology', Emma Macdonald, *The Canberra Times*, November 19, 2015)

The Expert panel reported that:

- School psychologists feel extremely frustrated when they know they have the skills to help students but do not have the time to give them the amount of support they need. Teachers feel likewise (p.132).
- "Throughout the Panel's consultation, the lack of capacity of school psychologists to meet student need was a consistent theme raised by many stakeholders in the public sector" (p.132).
- "Over 30% of school leaders nominated additional access to the school psychologist as one thing that would make a difference in supporting students with complex needs and challenging behaviour" (p.132).

By resourcing the 1:500 ratio of school psychologists to students recommended by the Expert Panel, the ACT Government will enable speedy and accurate diagnosis of student disability, learning difficulties, and mental health. It will enable targeted, comprehensive and effective interventions to be delivered when and where they are needed. This is vital to students with complex needs and challenging behaviours. It's what they and their families have a right to. It will make a big difference in the educational experience of the peers of those students. And it will enable every educator to do their job more effectively – and more safely.

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Further Reading

Expert Panel on Students with Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviours

http://www.det.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/795186/62074-Expert-Panel-Report-Web.pdf

ACT Government Response - Expert Panel on Students with Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviours

http://www.det.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/793981/Expert-Panel-Response-final.pdf

'Students at the Centre: Expert Panel Report Released', Media Release from Minister for Education, 18/11/2015

http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/burch/2015/students-at-the-centre-expert-panel-report-released

'More school counsellors to help students as part of \$167m mental health upgrade', Yoni Bashan, *The Sunday Telegraph*, March 7, 2015

<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/more-school-counsellors-to-help-students-as-part-of-167m-mental-health-upgrade/news-story/dc802166b8e763829dd24c8f4a644fe2>

ACT Legislative Assembly Hansard, Answers to Questions, 9 – 11 February 2016

(see p.25 for Minister for Education's statements on number of school psychologists in ACT schools)

<http://www.hansard.act.gov.au/hansard/qtime/answer01d.pdf>

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