

Kids in Trouble

“Young Kiwis Face Emotional Turmoil” was the headline in the “Press” recently. The article went on to discuss some ways of dealing with this turmoil, including the “Travellers” programme running at Christchurch Boys’ High School and Cashmere High School. It also noted that New Zealand has the highest suicide rate in the OECD for people aged 15 to 19.

Yes, young Kiwis do face emotional turmoil, and we see it in the headlines all the time. Suicide, binge drinking, high rates of teenage pregnancy, violence, sexual and physical abuse within families, eating disorders, self harm, bullying at school...the list goes on and on. There is no doubt that New Zealand adolescents are a high risk group.

Who provides a qualified, professional, front line mental health service to this high risk group? School counsellors do. Contrary to some popular belief, school counsellors are not just warm fuzzy well intentioned teachers with no particular skills or qualifications. On the contrary, school counsellors are particularly well qualified, with over 70% of NZAC member school counsellors qualified to post graduate level in counselling, and nearly half qualified to Masters level. While mental health is the main focus, most school counsellors are also trained, experienced teachers and often carry out a wide range of education related tasks such as helping students address barriers to learning, make subject choices, modify learning programmes, and in some cases teaching classes, as well as taking sports teams and going on school camps.

So, given that we have a group of trained professionals, who provide a range of educational services and front line mental health services, to a high risk population – why would the Government consider doing something that would destabilise and possibly jeopardise this service?

The Minister of Education (“Press”, 4 July) is considering taking school counsellors out of teacher registration, and off the teaching payroll (staffing entitlement). This would create two serious problems for students, schools and their Boards of Trustees. Firstly, Boards would have to find the money to pay counsellors from the already inadequate Operations Grant. This would be very difficult indeed for many schools, and they could be forced to replace trained specialist counsellors with cheaper alternatives. Cheaper alternatives will tend to give a service commensurate with price. A teacher trained school counsellor who is part of the school’s professional staff is far better placed to advocate for students and parents with teaching colleagues, senior management and Boards than a young youth worker with a one year training course. Without teaching knowledge and experience, how can this person help a student with mental health issues navigate the best path through an NCEA course severely restricted by performance limitations and irregular school attendance? Would this person have sufficient training and experience with children and adolescents to recognise the warning signs of suicide risk, and to generate an appropriate solution?

Secondly, students and schools are currently protected from incompetent or unethical behaviour on the part of teachers, including counsellors, by the legally enforceable standards of teacher registration. If counsellors are removed from this framework then the protection is lost. Organisations such as NZAC (New Zealand Association of Counsellors) do have comprehensive codes of ethics but they are not legally enforceable, unlike teacher registration.

Do schools and students really need protection from teachers? Well, the “Press” of 22 June reports that in 2008, Teachers Council dealt with eighteen cases of serious misconduct, and de registered thirteen teachers as a result. This would suggest that they do. Boards deserve protection, too. Currently Boards are protected by teacher registration. If a teacher is suspected of serious misconduct, all the

Board needs to do is advise Teachers Council who take over the process from there. If the teacher is deregistered the Board does not need to take disciplinary action.

However, if school counsellors are removed from teacher registration, the Board must make up its own process in the event of a serious complaint, in a specialist area where very few Board members have expertise. This would obviously involve the Board in considerable time and the risk of legal challenge. Boards need this like they need a major school fire!

To be fair, the Minister has not yet announced a decision in this matter. It is to be hoped that she will make the right one.