An Evaluation of the Strengthening Support to Families Project

A joint project between Maroondah City Council - Bayswater North Community Renewal, EACH Social and Community Health, Department of Human Services, Bayswater Nth Primary School and Anglicare Victoria

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1. Executive Summary

This study examined the benefits of employing a Family Support Worker (FSW) based at a primary school in Melbourne, Australia. The school has a number of high needs families who require extensive support from school staff.

Pre and post intervention data were collected from school staff on the time spent on social problems in the school community. Pre and post intervention Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires were completed by teachers whose students and families were clients of the FSW (N=8) and compared with non clients (N=10). Semi-structured interviews were held with FSW clients (N=6), class teachers (N=3), the assistant principal, principal and the FSW.

Employing a FSW showed a reduction in the amount of time spent on welfare cases for school personnel and parents, and therefore a monetary saving for the school that recouped much of the cost of the FSW. Modest improvements were seen in the Strengths and Difficulties scores. Qualitative data collected from school staff and FSW clients was overwhelmingly positive.

Having a FSW based at a primary school provides savings in teacher time, and expenses to the school. Teachers are freed to concentrate on education and the parents valued the accessibility and relationship provided by the FSW.
This evaluation examined the benefits of employing a Family Support Worker (FSW) at a primary school. This project was jointly funded by EACH Social and Community Health (EACH) and Department of Human Services (DHS) as part of the Bayswater North Community Renewal Initiative. Partners included: Maroondah City Council, Bayswater North Primary School, Anglicare and the two funding organisations.

Bayswater Nth Primary School, the school where the FSW was based, provided accommodation for the FSW, venue costs and staff time. EACH, a large community health service with locations throughout Australia, has had a partnership agreement with BNPS for the last five years. They assisted in initiating the project by providing advice and funding. The FSW was seconded to work at the school from Anglicare. Anglicare is the welfare division of the Australian Anglican church, providing services such as foster care, parent education and counseling. ¹

This report presents the findings and recommendations of the evaluation undertaken between October 2012 and April 2013 of the Strengthening Support to Families Project.

Consultation was undertaken with the clients of the Family Support Worker (FSW), key stakeholders, and teachers who had contact with the Family Support Worker.

A cost-effectiveness analysis of the service was conducted to indicate the costs and savings of delivering the service. Strengths and Difficulties pre and post questionnaires were administered to a group of children who were clients of the FSW and a control group of children who did not engage with the FSW.

A project reference group was established and chaired by Maroondah City Council. Members included:

- Berna Buzaglo, Principal, Bayswater Nth Primary School
- Kerry Peake, Assistant Principal, Bayswater Nth Primary School
- Maggie Palmer, Health Promotion Manager, EACH Social and Community Health
- Elizabeth Senior, Senior Health Promotion Officer, EACH Social and Community Health
- Noelene Greene, Program Manager, Community Planning and Development, Maroondah City Council
- Amanda Exley, Manager, Anglicare
- Mieke Breman-Mertens, Community Participation, Local Connections. Department Human Services
- Kinsie Hope, Manager, Local Connections, Department of Human Services.

Academic advice, in particular regarding the cost-effectiveness analysis was provided by health economist Associate Professor Dr Lisa Gold, and research assistant Sarah Carr, both from Deakin University, Burwood, Melbourne.

3. Background

3.1 Bayswater Nth Primary School

Bayswater Nth Primary School (BNPS) has an enrolment of 380 and is 32 kilometers from the CBD. Over 35% of the students are living in a sole parent family. The Victorian State Government and Maroondah City Council have identified the community of Bayswater North as having significant needs, including a high number of disengaged young people. Consequently in 2007, the neighborhood was included as one of the eight Community Renewal projects funded in Victoria. Since 2007 a range of projects have been implemented with a focus on bringing together residents, local organisations and community groups, and government agencies to strengthen wellbeing in community, upgrade community facilities and strengthen community and economic participation.

Average household income in the area is lower per week than the Victorian average. The area is rated as being in the most disadvantaged deciles. In the Australian Early Development Index, the suburb is listed as having a high percentage of children who are ‘Developmentally Vulnerable.’ Ten percent of students have been categorized as being below the 10th percentile in regards to readiness for school. This result means that the school has a large percentage of children who require special attention to bring them up to the state mean. In 2011, Bayswater Nth was ranked second last out of 314 suburbs in The Age Livability ranking.

Over the past five years the school has worked in a systematic and holistic way to address areas of concern within the school. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) Attitudes to School Survey data shows an upward trend in many areas, since 2009 with significant gains in 2011. Previously the school was struggling with low school connectedness, difficulties with classroom behavior, low motivation and poor morale identified by both students and teachers. Over the past few years all of these areas have improved. Many have moved from the 25th percentile in 2009 to the 90th percentile in 2011.

Despite these gains, the school has a number of high needs families who require extensive time and support from school staff. Many of these students exhibit difficult behavior. Teachers identified that students often arrive at school tired, and burdened by problems within their families. Parents indicate that they are working longer hours to sustain a basic standard of living. In many instances children are required to accept adult responsibilities within the family.

The teachers report that the physical health of some of the students is poor. Students have limited access to nutritional meals; a high amount of fast food is consumed. Many students spend long hours in front of TV or computers. The school was experiencing a high degree of students and parents who were disengaged with the school and with their peers. Many teachers were suffering from low morale due to continually managing problems within the classroom and incidents within the playground. Some teachers felt that they were spending so much time dealing with problems of students and parents, that it was difficult to find time for numeracy and literacy.

The school staff felt that these students and their families required support in accessing relevant services and that the students needed extra support to cope with home issues. They needed additional support and access to targeted interventions of Family Services.

In conjunction with the BNPS Senior leadership team, EACH Social and Community Health, Maroondah City Council, Bayswater Nth Community Renewal Project, and DHS, the school decided to seek funding for a Family Support Worker (FSW). The aim of this project was to provide extra support these families and to lighten the burden on the teachers.

This was the start of the Strengthening Support to Families project.

3.2 A Health Promoting School

The teachers report that the physical health of some of the students is poor. Students have limited access to nutritional meals; a high amount of fast food is consumed. Many students spend long hours in front of TV or computers. The school was experiencing a high degree of students and parents who were disengaged with the school and with their peers. Many teachers were suffering from low morale due to continually managing problems within the classroom and incidents within the playground. Some teachers felt that they were spending so much time dealing with problems of students and parents, that it was difficult to find time for numeracy and literacy.

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2 Australian Early Development Index Community Profile 2012. Maroondah, Victoria. Centre for Community Child Health The Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne

At the start of 2009 EACH and Bayswater Nth Primary School signed a three year agreement to work together to promote healthy eating, physical activity and mental health using the Health Promoting Schools (HPS) model. The HPS approach is based on the social model of health. It emphasizes the entire organization of the school. The school has a HPS committee made up of parents and teachers and an EACH Senior Health Promotion Officer. The committee has conducted a number of surveys of the parents, teachers and students resulting in a diverse group of projects such as refurbishment of the students toilets, more sports equipment available at lunch time for the students, a Pilates group for teachers, and a group of EACH volunteers who assist with maintenance at the school, to name a few.

The school has a strong commitment to the physical, emotional and social wellbeing of their students. As part of this commitment the curriculum committee has developed a unit called “Happy Healthy Humans”. This classroom work is reinforced by a comprehensive Healthy Eating, Staff Health and Physical Activity plan managed by the HPS committee. All of these programs are integrated throughout the entire school community including the staff, parents and students.

BNPS uses a Restorative Practices approach while utilising the Tribes program. Tribes is a whole school program to create a positive school environment. There are four ‘agreements’ that all teachers and students abide by. The Tribes program is used in schools internationally to improve collaborative skills, and teacher and student participation. BNPS also uses the KidsMatters program. KidsMatter is a whole-school approach to improving children’s mental health and wellbeing. At the end of 2013 BNPS had finished all four components of KidsMatter.

BNPS has created a school that provides a culture of physical and emotional support to the parents, teachers and students of the school community. The lessons learnt in the classroom with regards to emotional and physical health, are reinforced out of the classroom by the supportive environment fostered by the teachers.

The combined strong interest in student welfare, the high number of sole parent families at the school, and the difficulties that teachers were reporting with student behavior led the school to consider an alternative way of dealing with these difficulties. This led to the idea of the family support worker.

3.3 Strengthening Support to Families Project

The primary focus of the Strengthening Support to Families projects was vulnerable families. The intended aims of the Strengthening Support to Families Project were to:

- Reduce the amount of time teaching staff spend on dealing with welfare issues and student’s behavioral issues.
- Strengthen parental capacity to provide basic care, ensure safety and promote their child’s development
- Improve the family’s community awareness, connections and access to community resources.
- Empower school staff to support vulnerable families and children due to a greater understanding of how to navigate the service system and better connection with the services.

The project consisted of two core elements: Case Management and Service Coordination for vulnerable families in the Bayswater Nth area.

The case management service took the form of a FSW, who was based at BNPS. The worker provided vulnerable families with counseling.

The FSW seconded to the position was highly experienced. She has a Bachelor of Science, majoring in Psychology and a Bachelor of Social Work. Her previous experience involved, eighteen months at Department of Corrections, five years in Child Protection as a Senior Practitioner and five years in Anglicare in Family Services. The FSW worked at the school three days per week. The time was spent at the school, on home visits or at the Anglicare office.

There was a high degree of collaboration between the FSW and school staff. All referrals through the school came through the Assistant Principal. The Assistant Principal and FSW discussed the referrals regarding appropriateness, with the Assistant Principal providing the FSW with background to the referral. Teachers were able to access the FSW whenever they required. A number sought advice on behavior management strategies for challenging members of their class. Sporadically the FSW was called to intervene in the classroom in crises situations. The FSW would frequently seek teachers out to get a full briefing regarding children’s behaviour in the classroom. On occasion the FSW would meet with a student in the classroom. Referrals were made by outside agencies directly to her via the FSW’s referral form.

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3. Background continued

The service co-ordination aspect contained a community education and awareness raising component. The FSW organized a range of group programs for struggling students, which included:

- Martial Arts Therapy Program, twelve children participated over 8 weeks,
- Reach Program to improve resilience and social skills delivered to all grade five students
- Boys Will be Men, to be run during term 4, 2014

Teachers participated in a seminar which provided details regarding referral pathways to government services such as DHS, Child First and Family Services. Teachers also had the option to attend an educational seminar around supporting children as they get older, media portrayal of children and cyber safety. The Principal, Chaplain and Assistant Principal attended this.

Like many teachers around the world, teachers in Australia report that their workload has increased dramatically in the last ten years. Not only do they report an increase in workload, but also an increase in complexity in the roles that they are required to fill. Kyriacou and Sutcliffe argue that teachers’ experience of stress results from demands placed on them which they were unable to, or had difficulty meeting. Teachers report that they are dealing with very vulnerable children and families. These school community members require a large amount of attention from the school staff. They need specialised assistance to cope with serious social and emotional issues. School staff are frequently drawn away from their core business, teaching and school administration to deal with these ‘high needs’ families.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Victoria (DEECD) currently employ Student Support Services Officers (SSSOs). The purpose of the SSSOs is to “assist children and young people facing a range of barriers to learning, to achieve their educational and developmental potential through the provision of specialised support at individual, group, school and network levels”. The SSSOs are co-located together in multidisciplinary teams in networks.

To access the Student Support Services Program, schools refer wellbeing issues and cases to their Network Student Support Services Coordinator. All referrals are then prioritised and allocated to student support staff according to greatest need.

In 2012 a senate inquiry into teaching and learning identified that as teachers are being confronted with an ever increasing number of children with complex needs, the current SSSO structure struggles to provide the support that teachers need to assist these children and their families. Although many of these children exhibit high levels of need, they do not meet the requirements for extra funding and therefore struggle alone in the classroom. Early intervention is described by DEECD as “best practice”, however as cases referred to the SSSOs are prioritized “according to greatest need”, the service is restricted in its ability to implement early intervention strategies as it is constantly responding to crises and the most pressing cases.

Students who exhibit severe emotional and behavioral problems, can cause major problems in classrooms and take disproportionate amounts of teacher time and resources. These children frequently come from high needs families who also need assistance. A senate inquiry into teaching and learning conducted by the Australian Education Union identified that in New South Wales from 1977, there have been significant increases in the number of students with high needs in mainstream classrooms. This includes the number of students with emotional disturbances, autism and moderate intellectual disabilities. School teachers are generally unable to provide the type of high level intervention needed by high needs families. They do not have the time, training or capacity to provide assistance to these families in the way it is needed.

5. Huffman AM. Students at risk due to a lack of family cohesiveness: a rising need for social workers in schools. The clearing house. 2013;86(1).
4. Methodology

Research Question - Does having a qualified, experienced Family Support Worker based at a primary school save the school staff time, money and provide a better quality service to the school community?

To evaluate the benefit of a school-based FSW we conducted a pre-post evaluation of school staff and students to assess the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of diverting families with social problems away from the school staff, principal, assistant principal and class teacher to a family support worker with welfare qualifications and experience.

School staff.

Pre and post intervention data were collected from the principal, assistant principal and class teachers at the study school. Process data on intervention delivery were collected from the FSW. School staff provided all student-related data; no data were collected directly from students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 3 class teachers, the FSW, the school principal and the school assistant principal. The class teachers were nominated by the assistant principal from the group of all school teachers who had students in their class whose families were clients of the FSW.

Family support worker clients.

Over the 15 months, the FSW had a case load of 20 clients (families). The FSW invited parents from eligible families to participate in the study, where only families with very short interventions or a lack of engagement were deemed ineligible. The FSW asked parents for their permission to pass contact details on to the researcher. Six parents agreed to be interviewed and were interviewed in a private room at the school, or in one case in the client’s home. The six parents who participated in the interviews were all females. Five were mothers, and one was a grandmother. Two described themselves as single parents, two as living with partners, one married and one divorced. Four of the mothers had children at the school where the FSW was based. Three of these were referred to the FSW by school staff, the fourth saw the information in the school newsletter. Two of the clients who did not have children attending the school were referred by social services and their doctor.

Pre and post intervention time capture.

In consultation with the assistant principal, we designed a form to capture the time spent by classroom teachers, the principal, assistant principal, and other staff such as the school chaplain and teachers aides, on children and families in regards to behaviour and welfare issues. The assistant principal took the responsibility for collecting this data. To minimise the impact of any one atypical week of the school term on time spent, pre- and post-intervention time data were collected for multiple weeks (weeks 1, 2, 5 and 6 in term 4, 2012 before the appointment of the FSW and weeks 1, 2, 6 and 7 in term 4, 2013, when the FSW was based at the school). Notes detailing the ‘incidents’ that reported time was spent on were also recorded.

Strengths and difficulties questionnaire.

The SDQ is an established brief behavioral screening questionnaire for 3 to 16 year olds. It exits in a number of versions to meet the needs of researchers. All of the versions of the SDQ ask around 25 psychological attributes, some positive and some negative. For this study the 25-item questionnaire for completion by parents and teachers of 4 to 16 year olds was used. Class teachers of 18 students identified by the school as high-needs completed the SDQ pre-intervention and again post-intervention. Of these students, eight were clients of the FSW, or their families were clients of the FSW, over the 15-month intervention period and 10 had no contact with the FSW over the intervention period. Those with no contact with the FSW included students who were referred to the FSW but chose not to take up the service and those with no incidents over the intervention period.

Semi-structured interviews.

The interview schedule was compiled from questions used in the Sure Start Family Support Outreach Service evaluation with input from the assistant principal. Recommendations by Esterberg were followed in constructing the interview schedule and conducting the interviews. A number of feminist scholars have advised that semi-structured interviews are an excellent way to study women and in particular, marginalized groups.

5. Key Findings

5.1 Cost-Effectiveness Analysis of the Family Support Worker

**Pre and post test time capture**

Weekly time use in pre and post-intervention periods was calculated based on the average reported time across the multiple weeks of reporting. Unit costs for the time input of principal, assistant principal, classroom teacher, teacher aide and family support worker were taken as the mid-point of salary scales for each occupational group in Victoria, Australia in 2013. Parent time was valued at the average Australian wage. All unit costs included on-costs to reflect the cost of superannuation, work cover and leave entitlements. All costs were reported in 2013 Australian dollars (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element Cost</th>
<th>Annual Salary</th>
<th>$ Per Hour</th>
<th>On Costed annual salary</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>$50,075</td>
<td>$32.30</td>
<td>$63,826</td>
<td>The 2012 average weekly total earnings for a full time employee was $963.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>$155,076</td>
<td>$78.21</td>
<td>$155,076</td>
<td>Level 3 Range (5-4) this is the mid-point between min and max for Principal level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>$119,610</td>
<td>$60.32</td>
<td>$119,610</td>
<td>Level 1 Range (2-4) this is the mid-point between min and max.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom teacher</td>
<td>$69,373</td>
<td>$44.60</td>
<td>$88,423</td>
<td>Accomplished A-5 (middle band of experience teaching staff) For teaching staff we will assume that they have some level of experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Aide</td>
<td>$61,608</td>
<td>$39.60</td>
<td>$78,526</td>
<td>Education Support Level 2 (3-3) this is the mid-point of the salary ranges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Support Worker</td>
<td>$61,407</td>
<td>$39.47</td>
<td>$78,269</td>
<td>SCHADS (School, community, home care and disability services) Level 6 PP3 - SW3 Year 3 due to experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Time capture and intervention costs**

Comparing the pre and post-intervention time use data shows a reduction in the amount of time spent on welfare cases for all school personnel and parents, with a total school time of 6.8 hours per week saved (Table 2). In this particular time capture, 100% of the teacher aide’s time was freed up allowing for time to be invested in working with other students. The classroom teacher’s time was reduced by 88%, and this has allowed for time to concentrate on education issues rather than welfare cases. The overall saving in school staff time was $509 per week (Table 2). This compares to the cost of the FSW time (three days per week) of $975 per week. From a provider or budgetary perspective, the net cost of the FSW was therefore $456, as much of the cost of employing a FSW was recouped through reduced school staff time spent on welfare cases. If the additional reduction in parent time is included, the net cost of the FSW falls to $323 per week from a societal perspective, as the combined reduction in time costs to school staff and parents recoups most of the cost of employing the FSW. This upfront net intervention cost needs to be weighed against the additional benefits generated by the work of the FSW, in terms of outcomes for students, their families, and longer-term cost-savings that will flow to government departments and society from any improvement in child development outcomes.
Table 2. Per Week, Reduction in Hours, Percentage Time, and Equivalent Cost Savings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reduction in 2013</th>
<th>Principal time</th>
<th>Assist. Prin. time</th>
<th>Class Teacher</th>
<th>Teacher aide</th>
<th>Total School Time</th>
<th>FSW Time</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average hours per week pre-FSW</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average hours per week post-FSW</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in hours per week</td>
<td>-1.4</td>
<td>-3.4</td>
<td>-1.8</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
<td>+24.7</td>
<td>-5.3</td>
<td>-5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% time reduction</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equivalent cost saving per week</td>
<td>$111.89</td>
<td>$205.27</td>
<td>$79.28</td>
<td>$8.80</td>
<td>$508.65</td>
<td>$975.00</td>
<td>$132.79</td>
<td>$ -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional cost of FSW</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2 Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire results

Strengths and difficulties questionnaire.

SDQ data were scored according to the instrument guidelines, with a total difficulty score of 14+ used as a cut off for abnormality scoring1*. Pre- and post-intervention scores for the students who were clients of the FSW or whose families were clients of the FSW were compared to those of the students who were non-clients of the FSW. As a small study in one school we did not intend for this comparison of student data to provide statistically significant results, but rather to provide an indication of the level of functioning of the students who were deemed likely to use the FSW pre-intervention, and who used the FSW post-intervention.

The SDQ data from this intervention captures aspects of the behavioural outcomes but has also shown positive changes in the number of events within this age group of students.

For the group of 18 students as a whole, SDQ scores at pre and post data collection show that very few students are low risk, therefore the majority of the students are serious cases. Between pre and post-intervention data collection there is some improvement in SDQ scores, with mean SDQ total difficulties score falling from 22.1 to 16.7 and 22% of students moving from “case” to “non-case” on the definition of abnormal score (Table 3).

Comparing the group of 8 FSW clients to the group of 10 non-clients shows no statistically significant differences between groups in this small single-school study. Both groups, on average, improved over time although in both groups at least half of students still showed abnormal scores post-intervention, which indicates the ongoing level of difficulties in this group.

Table 3. SDQ scores for children identified as high-risk for use of Family Support Worker services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>SDQ total difficulties score at pre-intervention</th>
<th>SDQ total difficulties score at post-intervention</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (SD) % Above cut-point</td>
<td>Mean (SD) % Above cut-point</td>
<td>Reduction in mean score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22.1 (6.3) 83%</td>
<td>16.7 (8.3) 61%</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients of FSW</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20.0 (6.5) 75%</td>
<td>16.4 (9.8) 50%</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-clients of FSW</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.7 (6.0) 90%</td>
<td>17.0 (7.4) 70%</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.3 Interviews with Family Support Worker Clients

Semi-structured interviews.

Qualitative data from the 12 semi-structured interviews were coded by the primary author. Data was open coded, employing grounded theory methodology. Codes were then analysed through analytical memo writing to identify patterns, categories and themes. Direct quotes are used to represent the most common types of responses received.

A number of overarching themes emerged across the parent, staff and FSW interviews that reflected experiences, feelings and ideas related to the program.

The key themes that were mentioned in all of the parent/guardian interviews were that the interviewees felt desperate, that they had tried many times to get assistance, but either failed or found that the assistance had little effect, that they needed practical and emotional support to attend the services they had been referred to, and deal with the paperwork and the professionals involved.

I was going into depression, hitting my children, couldn’t manage them and couldn’t cope.... I read about it in the school newsletter. I was at my wits end, and thought, well I may as well give it a go. I’ve tried everything else.

(INTERVIEW NO. 1)

I hit a brick wall; I didn’t know where to turn. I’d tried so many places. Some say you’re not eligible, others have long waiting lists. Some say they’ll get back to you, but they don’t.

(INTERVIEW NO.2)

She (FSW) has come with me to the hospital.... She came with me to the pediatrician. Having someone come with me has been good. It’s hard to go to these people alone. I’ve had support; it’s great to have someone to talk to

(INTERVIEW NO.6)

Sometimes she accompanied me to appointments. It is great to have someone who can go with you to support you, someone who is on your side

(INTERVIEW NO.2)

Clients appreciated that the FSW was able to work holistically with the entire family.

The majority felt uncomfortable sharing problems, other than those concerning their children, with the teaching staff. However they all realised that the problems concerning their children at school were all part of wider problems.

Then realised that I could talk to the FSW about the whole family, not just my son who was at the school

(INTERVIEW NO.2)

I’ve talked to the assistant principal and she is great, but she couldn’t help with many of my problems. It wasn’t just about my son, and I didn’t want to talk to her about my problems. Happy to talk with her about my son, but not myself. The thing is that it is not just about my son, it’s the whole thing.

(INTERVIEW NO.3)
Clients also valued the early intervention aspect of the FSW program. They all felt their situations would have continued to deteriorate to a crisis point, if the FSW had not intervened.

In the end things would have got so bad that I would have had a nervous breakdown, and I guess then something would have happened, help would have to come.

(INTERVIEW NO. 3)

I would have had to put up with the situation. I would have sunk lower, had more grief with DHS, my daughter might have been removed. It was going that way. (Her) involvement means that my daughter has stayed at home.

(INTERVIEW NO. 4)

The four interviewees who had children at the school valued the accessibility of having the service based at the school. They all appreciated that the FSW could come to their home.

But I don’t think I would have found her if she had not been at the school. The reason that I found her was that she was at the school.

(INTERVIEW NO. 1)

It means that I don’t have to go anywhere else. Because (she) is at the school I can drop in and see her. If I have a problem I can see her straight away. (She) is happy to come to my home. She’s at the school or comes to my home.

(TEACHER INTERVIEW NO.1)

Teachers also appreciated the knowledge and skills that the FSW brought to the school. In particular the teachers noted; her knowledge of the welfare system and how to navigate it, her ability to work holistically with the entire family which gave the teachers a better understanding of the background of the students, her capacity for casework, counseling and advocacy on behalf of her clients. The FSW was able to work on a personal level with the clients, but also at a systems level organizing services.

5.4 Interviews with Teachers

The overarching theme expressed by the teachers in the interviews was one of relief. Teachers were spending extensive amounts of time on challenging children and in some cases their family members. Not only did teachers report spending time on face-to-face issues with difficult children and struggling families, they frequently spent time allocated to class preparation and their own personal time making phone calls in regards to welfare information, referrals and appointments on behalf of families.

The time saved for me last year in particular with ***** was enormous. The situation that I was dealing with in my class room was immense. If the FSW had not taken on this family the teacher would have had to do it. The teacher last year spent many hours dealing with this particular family.

(TEACHER INTERVIEW NO.1)

Teachers often spend a lot of their time release on these issues; this has meant that teachers can spend the time on class preparation, which is what this time is meant to be used for. It has cut down after school and before school phone calls, cut the personal research that teachers have had to do to find supporting agencies.

(TEACHER INTERVIEW NO.2)
The FSW has benefited the school by knowing that they can go to an expert who is experienced in this area. She has contacts and the knowledge about working with these parents.

(PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW)

She is someone who knows the welfare system. She knows people in the system. Having a worker in a school that has a lot of social issues, she has also brought in a lot of information and programs and funding that we haven’t known was available.

(Teacher Interview No. 2)

The teaching staff have valued having the FSW based at the school as she is available immediately to intervene in crisis situations. This contrasts to the current system provided by DEECD where the school staff are required to collect information about the student which is then submitted via the Student Online Case System 12, 13

At times she intervened when in a child would have been sent home from school. She has intervened in crisis situation and was able to give the mother advice that has kept the child in school.

(PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW)

.....it provides onsite a means of offering assistance. This gives the parents the best opportunity to assist their child. Before the Family Support Worker, we would ring the Guidance Officer, usually we hadn’t met them. We would tell them what the problems were, but they didn’t provide hands on help, which is what we need.

(Teacher Interview No. 3)

The only downside to having the FSW in the school is the perception that the school has a high number of welfare issues which it is unable to deal with.

When you tell the parents that have a FSW at the school they assume that the school has a lot of problems and welfare issues. They think the FSW has been placed there, rather than the school being proactive in applying for one.

(PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW)
The major conclusion of this study is that a FSW based at a primary school provides immediate savings in terms of teacher time, and cost to the school and community. These savings recoup much of the cost of the FSW.

The qualitative data indicates that having a case model service rather than on-call provides better outcomes to the clients, a higher degree of satisfaction and reaches those families at greatest risk. Having a FSW based at the school has benefited the teachers in freeing their time to concentrate on education and relieved them of the responsibility of managing difficult family issues.

Although the FSW was based at the school, she benefited by being employed by a welfare agency, rather than the school itself. Due to the complexity of cases being handled, it is essential that the FSW is part of a larger welfare team where he/she can access appropriate support and supervision. The placement of a welfare professional attached to an agency also strengthens the relationship between the school and that agency. It means that the school is better placed to draw on the expertise of other professionals based at the agency.

The current on-call model provided by DEECD is failing teachers, students and their families. Teachers need the on-site presence of a welfare professional who has the training, experience and time to deal with crisis situations as they arise at a school. Having the FSW based at the school led to collaborative team work with the students, families and teachers, all working together to support the student and family to obtain the best outcomes. As the FSW was free to do outreach work, she was able to connect with the neediest parents who cannot or will not attend appointments, either at the school or with professionals. The FSW was able to accompany parents and students to appointments and assist with medical paperwork. This resulted in many of the most at risk children receiving assistance that was recommended years ago by SSSOs, however never followed up on. The ripple effect of attendance at these appointments included calmer classrooms, less stress on teachers and children possibly remaining in their own homes rather than being removed to foster care. The ability of the FSW to provide outreach, introduced an early intervention component to the work. As she was able to do home visits, she was able to intervene in the lives of troubled school families, before a crises. Many of these families are not proactive and will not seek assistance until a major life-threatening calamity results in emergency services such as the police or Child Protection being summoned.

Due to her presence at the school, the FSW was also available to assist teachers manage students who were ‘acting out’ in the classroom. On occasion the FSW was able to take responsibility for the student, thus freeing the teacher to return to the classroom and teaching, rather than spend time away from the class dealing with one difficult child.

Clients also appreciated the continuity of care that came with having an on-site professional. Many of the interviewees commented that they were able to get to know the FSW and develop a relationship with her. This is in contrast to the on-call model, where parents and teachers see a different professional every time. Teachers also appreciated the ability to seek advice from the FSW in regards to the challenging behavior of students in class. These students were frequently clients of the FSW and the teacher and FSW could work on the case in a collaborative manner.

These findings have implications for school principals, researchers and in particular educational policy makers. The results of this study suggest avenues for further exploration and research. To ensure the generalizability of the findings, this needs to be tested with a larger trial. It is important that educational policy makers acknowledge the amount of time school staff spend on welfare issues, rather than on teaching. Teachers are currently under stress from both directions. Classes now have a greater number of high needs children and families to deal. There is the expectation that teachers will deliver a differentiated curriculum designed to meet the needs of all of these diverse students combined with the pressure for their students to acquire high NAPLAN scores (national assessment tests).18 If Australia is to stop the decline in students’ achievements in maths and reading, schools need to be better equipped to deal with high needs families.19 Teachers need to be released back to teaching and trained welfare professionals need to take over the more complex intractable cases that teachers are now managing. Close to 50% of Australians who graduate as teachers leave the profession within the first five years. Many cite the difficulties of dealing with “kids and all their issues, the things that go on between them and their parents, and behaviour management”.20

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6. Conclusions

Having a FSW based at a school means that the school can reach beyond the universal prevention programs offered to the community and target those families most in need. There is the capability to identify and refer those families who need extra support. A number of clients who successfully engaged with the FSW had received numerous previous referrals to agencies and professionals, however had never acted on these.

It is worth noting that the FSW who participated in this project was a senior social worker with extensive experience in family centred approach and authorization to perform home visits. Findings from the successful High/Scope Perry Preschool program warn of the dangers of compromising the standard of family centred programs and expecting similar results.

Policy makers need to act now to ensure that these high risk families and children are assisted before they reach secondary school and the problems become more intractable. If Australia wants to maintain its place as a world leader in student performance and halt the current slide the priorities and choices are clear.


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7. Post script from Assistant Principal, three months after the FSW has left the school

Just today we have spent time talking with a grandmother who brought her grandson to school telling us that his baby sister died last night and he does not know yet and she needed help, we have a parent who is having major surgery next week and has struggled to know what will happen to her two children as she has no family to support her. We work with a mother who is a hoarder and will not allow anyone in the house and the two children sleep in her bed, we have a father in tears because he is out of work and his wife has left with the children, we have distressed parents with intervention orders being taken out against them, mothers who suffer depression and can’t get out of bed and parents who are dealing with drug and gambling issues and another family with one parent incarcerated, with the other is on parole.

We deal with the trauma and grief associated with family break up on a regular basis.

This is just a snapshot of the issues we face on a regular basis and we need to manage these as the impact of these issues are not addressed simply, nor overnight and often when new students arrive through the year they came with yet another issue and just when we start to help these families they often move on.

I am proud of the way our staff continue to support one another in their efforts to truly care for and educate our students and provide assistance to the families in our community.
8. Recommendations

1. Schools with a large number of ‘high needs’ families need an on-site highly skilled FSW.
2. The FSW needs to be based at the school a number of days a week.
3. The FSW needs to be employed by a welfare agency that can provide support and supervision.
4. The current SSSO network is crises driven and to be effective needs to be supported by a FSW based at the school who can provide case work which favours early intervention.