

Mental health practitioners in schools: Frequently Asked Questions

What is the new mental health service?

Trained mental health practitioners will be based in schools to provide an early intervention response for students with emerging or mild to moderate mental health concerns.

Why do we need this service?

Increasing numbers of school students are experiencing mental health concerns that are impacting on their learning.

A recent audit found that most of the department's investment in student mental health and wellbeing has been focused on:

- general wellbeing strategies available to all students
- support and responses for students with complex mental health concerns.

This means there is a gap in responses to students with mild to moderate and emerging mental health concerns.

The department commissioned Ernst and Young (EY) to conduct a feasibility study to explore options that could strengthen school-based mental health responses for students to address this gap.

The outcomes of this study indicated a need for a new mental health service in SA schools, through the employment of trained mental health practitioners to complement the existing wellbeing work occurring in schools.

How many mental health practitioners will be employed?

5 FTE mental health practitioners will be employed from Term 3, 2022 as part of the pilot service. Following the pilot, up to 50 FTE new roles will be available from 2023, including senior practitioners to provide supervision and support to these staff.

What will the mental health practitioners do?

The role of the mental health practitioner will be flexible and depend on the needs of the school. It can include:

- 1:1 assessment of student concerns and delivering strategies and supports to manage immediate distress (eg brief interventions)
- coordination of referrals to external mental health services for students requiring ongoing therapeutic intervention



- providing advice and checking in with students with more serious mental health concerns who are returning to school
- supporting students who are returning to school after mental health treatments
- developing the mental health literacy of the school communities.

What qualification and experience will these positions need?

It is expected the mental health practitioners come from a range of qualifications with mental health specialisation – psychology, social work, nursing, occupational therapy. A workforce analysis process will take place on other possible pathways to these positions.

Will there be a mental health practitioner in every school? Will my school employ a mental health practitioner as part of the new service?

The new mental health service will be piloted in a select cluster of schools from term 3, 2022. Following the pilot, the service will be refined and scaled up from 2023. The service will likely be a cluster model where mental health practitioners are shared between a group of schools in the same area. Secondary schools will be the focus of the new service, with some outreach to primary schools.

I already support students with mental health concerns as part of my role, what does this mean for me?

The new service will complement – not duplicate – existing services provided in schools, such as student wellbeing leaders and student support services.

Student wellbeing leaders will continue to play an integral role in schools at the universal or whole-of-school level. Student wellbeing leaders should continue to notice and respond to the early signs of mental health concerns, along with referring students to the department’s new mental health service.

Student support Services will continue to deliver key services to children and young people who have particular support needs, including physical, behavioural or wellbeing issues that impact on student learning.

The Social Work Incident Support Service will continue to provide critical incident responses.

Why won't the mental health practitioners diagnose mental health concerns or provide ongoing therapy to students?

Diagnosis and treatment of mental health concerns is the responsibility of health services, such as primary health care providers, and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). This service is being established to complement existing external responses, not duplicate existing services.

The department acknowledges that there can be wait lists and funding challenges for students requiring diagnosis and intensive clinical treatment. While this new service will not resolve this issue, it can reduce inappropriate referrals to external services. Early intervention may prevent the need for a more intensive service for some students.

Can I apply for a role in the new service?

More information about recruitment to the mental health practitioner roles will be provided in the coming months.