

School psychologists burnout warning

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Education reporter

School psychologists on the front-line of child mental health are burning out, leaving experts concerned some students are not getting the support they need.

A combination of lockdowns, remote learning, a teaching skills shortage, long waiting lists for mental health support and a significant bottleneck of disability assessments has led to an overwhelming demand for psychological support in schools.

Peggy Kern, associate professor at the University of Melbourne's

Centre for Wellbeing Science, said school psychologists were facing a "huge amount of stress and burnout", not only treating students but also teachers.

A national survey of 4599 children aged between nine and 17 and 2796 parents and grandparents by the National Children's Commissioner found young people had missed out on critical support during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 41 per cent of respondents saying it had a negative impact on their mental health.

National Children's Commissioner Anne Hollonds said the survey also found schools were a hub

for students to seek support, but there was "a massive workforce shortage leaving children without the mental health services they need".

Australian Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools spokeswoman Marilyn Campbell said school psychologists needed to triage students but sometimes had nowhere to refer them.

"We are constantly telling young people to ask adults for help: if you've been bullied, tell a teacher, if you are feeling suicidal - go and tell an adult. We are constantly saying adults can help you and here we are in a situation

where we are saying, 'I can't actually see you,'" she said.

"[School psychologists] have always been stressed. At the moment, they feel that [they] can't turn away any of the kids - and they are the severe ones - because no one is taking them," she said.

Victorian Education Minister Natalie Hutchins said the state had invested \$500 million in mental health in schools.

The government has created almost 2500 jobs in the sector, and has established the Schools Mental Health Fund, which allows schools to spend on a "mental health menu" that includes training and

staff. The program is available only in rural and regional government schools but will be available to all schools by 2024.

In June, the Victorian government also announced it would pour \$200 million into expanding mental health services at 1800 government and low-fee non-government primary schools across the state.

Kern said school was often a safe environment for students to disclose their concerns, but the system was "behind on the battle".

"We need more psychologists coming through. Those working in the position are burning out," she said.

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