

School-Link

health and education working together

The School-Link Training Program Evaluation Summary of Results and Recommendations

The mental health of young people is a priority of the NSW government.

Mental illnesses such as depression and related disorders, substance abuse, first onset psychosis and anxiety disorders pose a significant problem for young people and their families.

Recent research suggests that up to 24% of adolescents experience depression by the time they are 18 years old, however, only one out of four young people with mental health problems receives professional help. In the adolescent age group these services are most commonly provided through counselling at school.

School counsellors and specialist mental health workers have a key role in the identification, support and care of children and adolescents with mental health problems and their families.

NSW School-Link Initiative

The NSW School-Link initiative is a ground-breaking approach to improving mental health care for adolescents. It provides a framework and structure to support child and adolescent mental health services and schools to work collaboratively to promote mental health, prevent mental health problems and facilitate evidence-based identification, management and support of students with mental health problems.

The NSW Government allocated \$5.5 million over five years from 1998/99 to establish School-Link throughout NSW.

School-Link Training Program

The NSW School-Link Training Program was a statewide three-day training course developed for school and TAFE counsellors and mental health workers. The aims of the School-Link Training Program were to:

- develop understanding of depression and related disorders in adolescents
- demonstrate early identification and assessment of mental health problems in young people, particularly depression
- outline appropriate intervention strategies, incorporating evidence-based practice
- assist in developing Local Depression Action Plans relating to adolescents
- develop sustainable local, state and national support networks.

Development of the School-Link Training Program

A comprehensive process was undertaken to develop the School-Link Training Program. This included a needs analysis and extensive consultation, accessing a range of expertise in writing the program and delivery and ongoing updating and fine-tuning of the material and processes.

Implementation of the School-Link Training Program

- Forty-nine School-Link Training Programs were held throughout NSW in seventeen Area Health Services between July 2000 and December 2001.
- Approximately 1,800 school and TAFE counsellors and mental health workers attended the training. It was targeted at NSW Department of Education and Training counsellors and adolescent mental health workers, with other participants (such as Catholic school counsellors) being able to attend where places were available.
- The School-Link Training Program was co-facilitated by two experienced trainers, using an adult learning model.
- The implementation of the School-Link Training Program was coordinated statewide by the two trainers and locally by the Area School-Link Coordinator.

Success of the School-Link Training Program

Of the 1,800 participants trained, over 95% reported that the School-Link Training Program would help them deliver a better service to adolescents and young people.

In addition:

- approximately 90% identified the training as *excellent, very good or good* in meeting its aims
- 95% indicated they were *very satisfied or mostly satisfied* with School-Link training
- 97% would recommend that a colleague participate in the program
- 98% rated the trainers' delivery of the training as *excellent, very good or good*.

Participants' suggestions for improving the School-Link Training Program were mostly around the provision of more education and training on depression and other mental health issues relating to adolescents. They suggested expanding or adapting the training for other groups, such as teachers and Department of Community Services workers and providing additional advanced or more focussed training.

Other outcomes of the School-Link Training Program

There have been local improvements in contact between Health and Education staff.

The training program has helped to establish the Area School-Link Coordinator's role locally, provided a productive momentum to the whole School-Link initiative, generated goodwill and contributed to interest and involvement in prevention and promotion programs and other School-Link activities that further enhanced the profile and the implementation of School-Link across the state.

Area School-Link Coordinators, in response to needs identified by school counsellors, have jointly organised several School-Link conferences and forums on mental health issues for school counsellors and mental health workers. The events have been very well attended and have been evaluated very positively by participants.

Recommendations

The NSW School-Link Training Program was very successful in achieving its aims. A number of recommendations have been made to help to ensure these new directions in mental health care for adolescents are maintained and progressed.

Strategic structures at the State level

Recommendation 1

Five-year plans to continue the NSW School-Link initiative

Five-year plans should be developed at the State and Area Health Service level to ensure the development and sustainability of School-Link and to further develop School-Link to include other relevant mental disorders.

Area Health Service Management in collaboration with local NSW Department of Education and Training services and School-Link committees should ensure that the plans cover the spectrum of mental health interventions including assessment, treatment, promotion, prevention and early intervention.

Recommendation 2

Written agreement between the NSW Department of Education and Training and the NSW Department of Health

The School-Link Steering Committee develops a Letter of Agreement for School-Link between the NSW Department of Education and Training and NSW Department of Health. A subtitle for School-Link, such as 'health and education working together', should be adopted.

The School-Link information sheet should be updated and contain both the NSW Department of Health and NSW Department of Education and Training logos.

Recommendation 3

Continue the School-Link Steering Committee and establish a NSW School-Link Advisory Group

The already established School-Link Steering Committee will continue to have management responsibility for implementing the School-Link initiative and set the overall direction and parameters for School-Link.

A NSW School-Link Advisory Group should be constituted with a membership which includes representatives from the NSW Department of Education and Training and NSW Department of Health. Catholic and Independent Schools would also be invited to be represented. Functions of the advisory committee would include: overseeing the implementation of the recommendations of School-Link Training Program Evaluation report; advising the School-Link Steering Committee on relevant matters; incorporating National and State initiatives; considering the local Area School-Link reports provided annually (Recommendation 4); and, generally to strengthen and progress the collaborative and educational functions of School-Link.

The Secretariat functions for the steering committee and the advisory group will be shared by NSW Department of Health and the NSW Department of Education and Training.

Recommendation 4

Annual School-Link reporting process

Area School-Link Coordinators in conjunction with a nominee from the NSW Department of Education and Training and/or the Area School-Link steering committee provide a report annually on School-Link activities to the NSW School-Link Steering Committee.

Recommendation 5

Continued NSW School-Link Training

The NSW Department of Education and Training and NSW Department of Health formulate an agreed approach to further School-Link related training, including:

- annual updates of the NSW School-Link Training Program on depression and related disorders
- the development and implementation of the advanced School-Link training modules
- attendance requirements at future School-Link training
- extending depression and related disorders training to other key personnel including school, health and related workers
- identifying processes for meeting the needs for training on additional topics, such as anxiety in primary school aged children.

Strategic structures at the Area level

Recommendation 6

Resourcing and sustaining School-Link

Area Health Services identify resources from within their budgets to develop and maintain School-Link at a level specified by the Centre for Mental Health. This includes a full-time Area School-Link Coordinator or equivalent plus associated expenses.

Working together

Recommendation 7

Continuing support for collaboration

The NSW Department of Education and Training, NSW Department of Health and Area Health Service management continue to develop practices that emphasise the collaborative nature of School-Link, including:

- the use of logos of both the NSW Department of Education and Training and NSW Department of Health on School-Link statewide documents
- the involvement of School-Link with relevant NSW Department of Education and Training and health committees.

Communication

Recommendation 8

School-Link website and transfer of information

The potential for establishing a School-Link website and electronic transfer of information will be considered. The possible role of the School-Link lead agency in this initiative will also be considered.

Evaluation

Recommendation 9

Ongoing evaluation of the School-Link initiative

The School-Link Advisory Group, in conjunction with the Centre for Mental Health and Area School-Link Coordinators, develops a process for systematic evaluation and review of the School-Link initiative in Area Health Services. The evaluations would be reported in the local Area annual School-Link reports and inform future plans and methods to progress School-Link.

Local Depression Action Plans

A key outcome of the School-Link Training program was the development of over 170 Local Depression Action Plans across NSW, aimed at enhancing mental health service delivery to adolescents through increased collaboration between school and TAFE counsellors and mental health workers. These LDAPs include a range of creative and imaginative approaches tailored to suit local conditions and skills to:

- improve teachers' and parents' ability to recognise the early signs of depression and to respond appropriately
- improve access to services for young people by developing information websites, cards, leaflets, bookmarks, stickers, posters, games, screen savers and good news stories about young people
- improve interagency collaboration in the delivery of mental health services to young people through enhanced interagency communication and understanding.

Examples of Local Depression Action Plans

Western Sydney Area Health Service

Emergency Wheel (Mt Druitt) for teachers working with students with special needs, which includes indicators of depression and classroom strategies for the management of students with depression, anxiety, adjustment to loss, disruptive behaviours and substance abuse.

Far West Area Health Service

Adolescent Depression Quilt (Bourke) is made up of panels created by young people containing artwork or text about depression and other mental health issues which were sewn together into a large quilt that tours high schools and community events for display and is used as a trigger for discussion groups.

Northern Rivers Area Health Service

School-to-Health Referral Form (Grafton/Maclean) was devised by participants from this district and includes a tracking mechanism used to review satisfaction with the referral process.

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A copy of the full report on the evaluation of the School-Link Training Program, *School-Link: health and education working together. The School-Link Training Program Evaluation Report* (NSW Department of Health, August 2003) SHPN (CMH) 020163 is also available:

Further copies of these documents can also be downloaded from the NSW Health website: www.health.nsw.gov.au