

Process evaluation of the Refugee Student Counselling Support Team

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

Evaluation background

The Refugee Student Counselling Support Team (RSCST) is a small Sydney-based team that provides specialised support to NSW public schools that have refugee students enrolled. Its main work areas include:

- tailored professional learning
- targeted counselling in complex cases and additional support for the school counselling service
- advice and consultation
- assistance connecting refugee students and their families to other local supports.

CESE conducted a process evaluation which involved:

- 43 in-depth interviews with RSCST team members, school-based staff, internal and external providers of refugee services
- development of four case studies to illustrate good practice
- a review of activity data and self-evaluation data collected by the team.

Main findings

The RSCST has a well-established service model that has been refined over time since its inception in 2016. The team's reach has been broad and it has carried out an increasing volume of work in each of its core areas.

Capacity building has been the key priority from the outset and occurs through an array of professional learning workshops and via side-by-side work with school counselling staff. An increasing proportion of the team's time has been spent providing targeted counselling support for refugee students with complex needs. The team also conducts group support work that is highly valued by schools. The team has established a contact number that is manned throughout the week for school enquiries and has developed strong local partnerships with internal and external refugee services.

School staff consistently observed that the team's work has led to improvements in refugee students' social and emotional skills, a reduced incidence and intensity of negative behaviours, and an increased readiness to learn. They described improvements to the wellbeing of students' families, stemming from increased trust and confidence in school staff. Further, many school staff felt more confident and supported to put into practice the skills and strategies learnt from the RSCST's capacity-building sessions and side-by-side counselling support. RSCST staff are particularly valued for their expertise in trauma-informed practice. The team's collaboration with other refugee services has improved the set of services available to schools and to refugee students.

Recruitment has been a key challenge, and the team has often operated with less than its full complement of eight staff. The nature of work requires a combination of specialist skills and personal attributes that are not easily found. The team is also working on increasing schools' awareness of the team's responsibilities and range of services, and on managing schools' expectations of support. An ongoing challenge is deciding how to prioritise the team's limited time most effectively across the state as demand for its services continues to grow.