On the evening of 25th February, AASW Victorian Branch School Social Work Practice Group convenors, Paul Jameson and Chris Barrett, presented a CPD workshop: “Collaborative partnerships to support children & young people in the school setting”. Attendees represented family and community support agencies, private practitioners and school employed social workers.

School social work is guided by the AASW Practice Standards for School Social Workers, to focus on the student in the learning environment. Generalist and school-specific interventions from prevention through to complex intervention, based on bio-psycho-social-educational (Barrett, 2014) assessment, require multiple direct and indirect methods to remove the barriers to learning. The achievement of learning potential is seen as a social justice goal intrinsic to child protection and wellbeing.

Since 1949, Victorian school social workers liaised with other service provider colleagues, with formal case management meetings and programme planning more evident from the 1980s. Before the wider establishment of child, youth and family support agencies, such services were provided by school social workers, who continue to do this as needed.

Education policy has increasingly focused on access, equity, and wellbeing as a prerequisite for learning. Strategies to support vulnerable children (DHS, 2013, DEECD, 2014) and those in out-of-home care (DEECD & DHS, 2011), responded to the interconnection between family and community vulnerability, and poorer educational and developmental outcomes, with the requirement collaboratively to develop locally relevant responses and improved service coordination.

However, there are impediments to day-to-day collaboration. Schools are logical sites for service delivery and “safe havens” from distress, but can seem at times baffling and impenetrable. Educators can be equally frustrated by agency practices and program limitations. Successful collaborative partnerships have been forged within the “common ground” at the intersection between schools and other institutional settings, through a focus on the shared wellbeing and educational goals for children and young people.

Teachers and social workers value education as a right, and currently the path towards best learning and life outcomes. Their common goal is the wellbeing and potential of students and their families, inclusive of their diversity, through the integration of safety, wellbeing and learning responses.

Successful collaborations begin with clear communication with those in the school or agency with direct responsibility or influence in student wellbeing or case management. Some may need to challenge their own prejudices about the school or partnering organisation. Agencies might consider allocating caseworkers according to primary school, thereby maximising the efficiency of school-agency communication. Delays in the provision of information or the assignment of caseworkers, should be signalled to the school contact person. With little flexibility to leave, teachers appreciate meetings at school.

Teachers, social workers and other family support professionals face the frustrations of their own rigid institutions, with inadequate resourcing and few alternate programs properly to address the personal, learning, family and social issues that children face. Schools need and appreciate effective partnerships with DHS and community agencies, but with multiple institutional imperatives, collaboration is facilitated by effective communication to analyse and problem-solve within different professional and organisational perspectives.


Dr Chris Barrett (PhD, BA, DipT, BSW, MSW) is a long experienced teacher and school social worker. She has recently completed research into the 65 year development and practice of school social work in Victoria.